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BRIAN ALDISS

COMMANDER CALEX KILLED, FIRE AND FURY AT EDGE OF WORLD, SCONES PERFECT

GRAHAM JOYCE ON THE FACTS OF LIFE • JOHN PAUL CATTON ON THE DARK SIDE OF JAPANESE CULTURE

M. JOHN HARRISON ON TOLKIEN AND THE FANTASY FACTORY • JEFF TOPHAM ON 'NEW WAVE FABULISM'

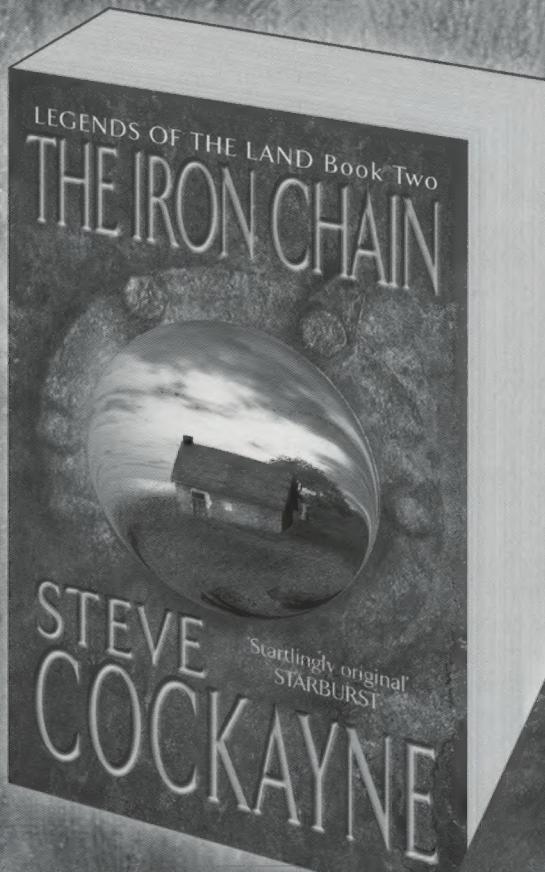
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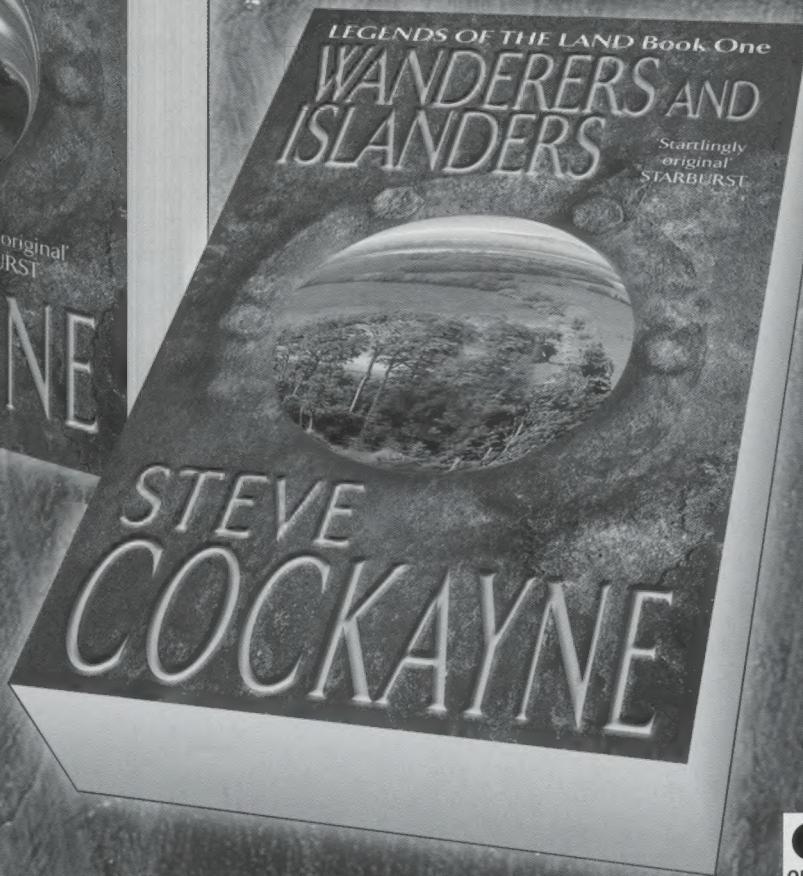
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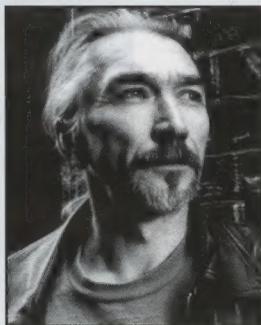
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TOLKIEN IS NOT AN ISSUE

M. John Harrison



Hell would be having to make the choice between Tolkien's pedestalled princess Arwen Evenstar, to whom approach is only feasible if you are certified royal (and even then only after various gestures aimed at defusing her purity and your superego) and the fatuous Hollywood version of Arwen presented by Liv Tyler in Peter Jackson's film of *The Two Towers*.

In the end I think I'd go for the original, because at least she speaks English. Also you somehow imagine her face, though immobile with the transcendent perfection of her spirit etc etc, would show something more than fleeting teen Buffy mall angst as she contemplated the great issues of the day – the Triumph of Duty in the Face of Individual Need, the Construction of Orcs as Other to Our Self and so on and so forth. Tolkien's Arwen would in short, despite her inhuman beauty, probably be the more human of the two.

Luckily, because there are real women in a real world, men, up against it in all other respects, don't have to make that choice. Equally, women don't have to decide between Tolkien's priggish Arrogant – sorry, Aragorn – and Viggo Mortenson's queasy portrayal of him as New Man wedded to Man With No Name, a sort of tame gypsy to thrill the successfully middle aged cinemagoer.

The same is true of Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* and the fantasy boom itself. We don't have to make a choice between one crap thing and another crap thing. We don't actually have to have an opinion about any of it, because so much of interest is happening elsewhere.

Who cares about Tolkien when we can read a new short story by Kelly Link or Tim Etchells, a new novel of Jonathan Carroll's? Who cares about Tolkien when we have a new book by China Miéville, John Courtenay Grimwood or Justina Robson? When Joel Lane's *The Blue Mask* is published – if rather invisibly – by Serpent's Tale? Who cares about three-decker fantasy of any kind, when the Guardian and the Times Literary Supplement are beginning to give their attention to what's actually worthwhile in genre writing? By the time any cultural phenomenon hits its peak, it is already extinct, and the livelier vice-presidents in the relevant corporates are already looking for the next contender. Less innovative executives will go down with the ship. The western was forced to face the truth of this. The spy novel was forced to face the truth of this. The horror novel, too.

The real mistake of the fantasy factory was not to freeze its readers in the undeconstructed cultural attitudes of the early 1950s; or even to publish endless indifferently-written books by US teenagers with a literalistic tendency in the portrayal of motive. The real mistake of the fantasy factory was to cuckoo every other kind of fantasy out of the nest, to empty the category of genuine imagination, to turn it from a bazaar of the bizarre into the Do It All of 'world building' and pseudo history. But for those who can be bothered to write it, even industrial fantasy is being redefined in a live, day-to-day relationship with its own material, as the three-decker is quietly replaced by the innumerable fantastic voices – each one as distinctive, undefinable and genuinely creative as its own author – it was used as a pillow to smother.

Tolkien is no longer an influence on the innovators of the genre he invented. If we want to see the back of the old fart, let's not give him deathbed support by having an opinion about him. The worst thing we can do is set ourselves up in opposition. Cultural opposites depend upon one another. They prop one another up. Something Tolkien failed to understand was that when Barad Dur falls, Gondor falls too. Let's not make the same mistake. Let's not be one thing or the other, Tolkienista or Next Waver. Let's be something new.

M. John Harrison's brilliant new novel *Light* is out now, published by Gollancz in hardback at £17.99 and paperback at £10.99. Mike's website is at www.mjohnharrison.com, and he has a message board on TTA's discussion forum at www.ttapress.com/discuss.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARC WERNER

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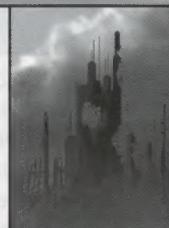
Simon was born in 1978 in a tiny nondescript village in Derbyshire, but now lives in Nottingham. He's been to university twice, leaving the first time because the course was crap, and the second time because he was asked.

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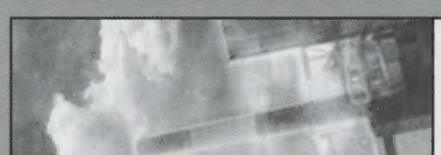
**MIKE BOHATCH****CROW MAN**

Mike is a professional dark-style illustrator and artist with lots of credits to his name. Residing in Colorado and educated in all mediums, his mixed media work can be found in film, music, publications, web, books and comics.

www.eyesofchaos.com

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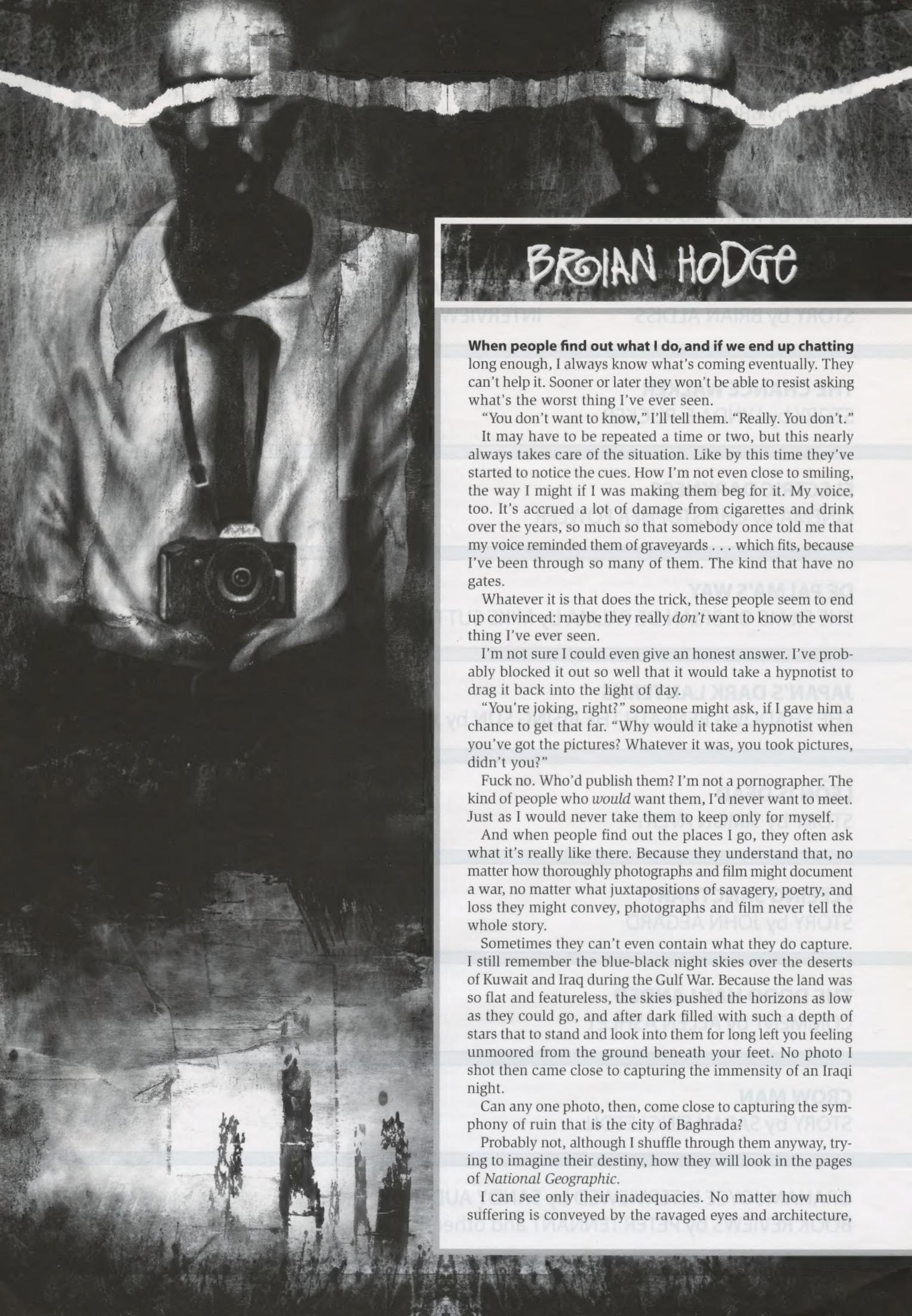
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BRIAN HODGE

When people find out what I do, and if we end up chatting long enough, I always know what's coming eventually. They can't help it. Sooner or later they won't be able to resist asking what's the worst thing I've ever seen.

"You don't want to know," I'll tell them. "Really. You don't."

It may have to be repeated a time or two, but this nearly always takes care of the situation. Like by this time they've started to notice the cues. How I'm not even close to smiling, the way I might if I was making them beg for it. My voice, too. It's accrued a lot of damage from cigarettes and drink over the years, so much so that somebody once told me that my voice reminded them of graveyards . . . which fits, because I've been through so many of them. The kind that have no gates.

Whatever it is that does the trick, these people seem to end up convinced: maybe they really *don't* want to know the worst thing I've ever seen.

I'm not sure I could even give an honest answer. I've probably blocked it out so well that it would take a hypnotist to drag it back into the light of day.

"You're joking, right?" someone might ask, if I gave him a chance to get that far. "Why would it take a hypnotist when you've got the pictures? Whatever it was, you took pictures, didn't you?"

Fuck no. Who'd publish them? I'm not a pornographer. The kind of people who *would* want them, I'd never want to meet. Just as I would never take them to keep only for myself.

And when people find out the places I go, they often ask what it's really like there. Because they understand that, no matter how thoroughly photographs and film might document a war, no matter what juxtapositions of savagery, poetry, and loss they might convey, photographs and film never tell the whole story.

Sometimes they can't even contain what they do capture. I still remember the blue-black night skies over the deserts of Kuwait and Iraq during the Gulf War. Because the land was so flat and featureless, the skies pushed the horizons as low as they could go, and after dark filled with such a depth of stars that to stand and look into them for long left you feeling unmoored from the ground beneath your feet. No photo I shot then came close to capturing the immensity of an Iraqi night.

Can any one photo, then, come close to capturing the symphony of ruin that is the city of Baghrada?

Probably not, although I shuffle through them anyway, trying to imagine their destiny, how they will look in the pages of *National Geographic*.

I can see only their inadequacies. No matter how much suffering is conveyed by the ravaged eyes and architecture,

WITH ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO SUN TZU

no matter how much empathy is aroused, no matter how fast you run to your checkbook to write a donation for the refugees, still . . . to me, it's only surface now. Only ink and paper.

Because if Baghrada isn't necessarily the place of the worst thing I ever saw, it's the place of the worst thing I ever learned.

We arrived in late September, the days still warm but the evenings turning cold. From our various parts of the globe, we'd all flown in to Budapest, then cobbled together hasty travel arrangements and drove in across the border – got ourselves smuggled in, more like it, paying sympathetic locals to help get us in without attracting attention. It's been the way of mass murder ever since the rise of mass media: whichever side is committing the worst atrocities is the one that doesn't want the story told to the rest of the world.

Five of us, ours was a union of mutual support and convenience, an alliance of acquaintances, friendships, and sporadically-entwined histories that went back as far as twenty-odd years. Doolan and I went back the longest, the two of us having met as younger daredevils in Peshawar, Pakistan, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It had been his first time out of Australia, and the two of us shared a room in the Khyber Hotel, a one-star pisshole that served as base camp for lots of foreign journalists before jumping over into the war zone. Both blond-haired and fair-skinned, we spent our last night there dyeing our hair and our new beards and even our skin, until we looked as native as we could, since the Russians had set a bounty on the heads of war correspondents. The next morning Doolan and I put our hangovers behind us and set off across the border to link up with the Mujahideen rebels and follow the progress of their campaign in the Panshir Valley.

Then there were the Barnetts, Lily and Geoff, freelance filmmakers based in London, who did a lot of assignments for the BBC. Doolan had gotten to know them first, a few years after he met me, running across the pair of them as newlyweds spending their honeymoon in the El Salvador of the mid-1980s.

Midori we'd known the least amount of time. She and I had met a few years earlier in the tribal slaughtergrounds of Rwanda. I was already familiar with her photographs, so to me it was like meeting a celebrity, although what eventually amazed me most was the quiet courage inside this tiny woman. Not just for the way she would run toward the places everyone else was running away from – we all did that – but for how much heart it must've taken her to pursue a life so alien to what had been expected of her by her family and culture in Osaka.

Our transportation to Baghrada was in two trucks, relics from earlier decades, and we captured images while on the roll. Now and again we would come across the remains of

ambushed convoys littering the otherwise peaceful countryside, the kind of vintage trucks and other military leftovers that are the usual rule in Eastern Europe. Most had been reduced to burnt-out hulks, manned by scrappy tatters that had once been human beings, hardly fit for burial anymore, just continued gnawing by animals. Some were by now nothing more than grimy skeletons, joints wrenched apart by explosions or scavengers.

We'd all seen enough of these sights to take them in stride, although they still seemed to make our drivers nervous. Stocky, bearded men who'd brought meals wrapped in cloth, they would furtively scan hedgerows and treelines and hillsides for threats. Back in America, they would've been working in factories, in power plants, driving busses. Here, they were taking risks for enough pay to assure them of being able to feed their families for the coming winter.

Of course we took their pictures too.

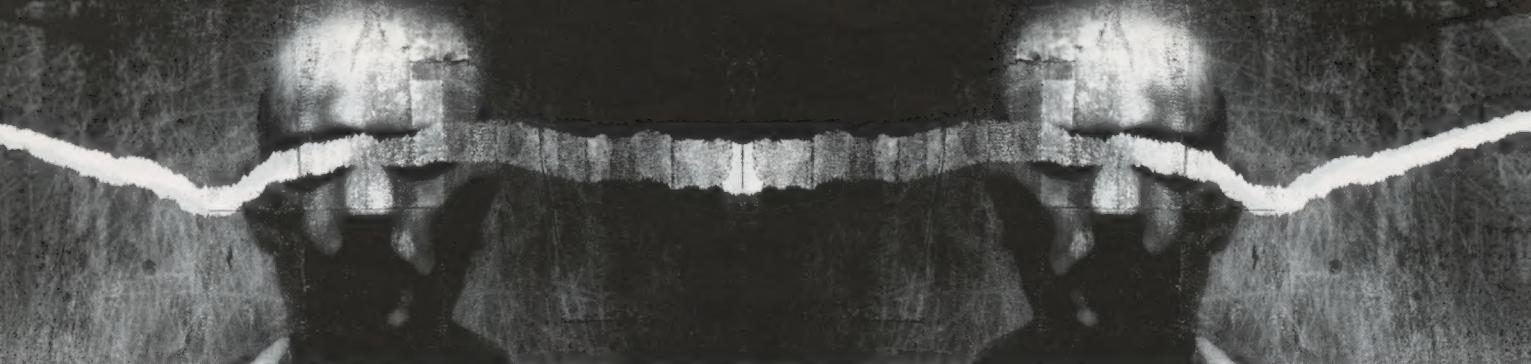
We were safe enough, I figured, the road to Baghrada running two hundred kilometers through territory secured by the insurgent army that had risen up against Codrescu's regime. But the closer we drew to the city, the less it seemed to matter. It was as though we were driving into a vast corpse, and even if we weren't harmed by what had actually killed it, the decay would be sure to get us in the end.

"You ever stop and wonder," Doolan said, "why some places just seem to be magnets for this sort of business?"

He'd done his homework, obviously. He knew.

Situated between a river and mountains mined for ores, Baghrada has been of strategic or economic value to over a millennium's worth of marauders. At one time or another, it has been set upon by Mongols, Ostrogoths, Saxons, Ottoman Turks, French, Serbs, Germans, Russians, and probably by armies that history has forgotten. Thirty years ago, they even found evidence of a Viking settlement there, although by all indications it had thrived in peace. Someone has always wanted Baghrada. It is a city with thousand-year-old scars, and as we came upon it, we saw that the wounds had been laid open once again.

Its peacetime population had climbed toward a quarter-million, but it would be some time yet before anyone might calculate what it had been reduced to. From a distance, only the smoke seemed alive. Lazy plumes rose into the sky or smudged against the tops of surviving spires and towers, wafting in the wake of the artillery barrages that had driven Codrescu's soldiers into retreat. The fires beneath the rubble might burn for months, a mixed blessing over the coming winter, with the poorest of the poor willing to blacken their lungs for the privilege of huddling against a still-warm heap of bricks.



Twice we went through checkpoints – once for free, the other time needing to bribe our way past, paying tribute to scruffy men in woolen vests, the impromptu peasant uniform of the rebel militia. Most of them carried Russian-made AK-47s slung from their shoulders with an insolent ease.

Deeper into Baghrada, its bones came into view. Buildings raised centuries apart had been blasted together, sides or ends collapsing and the husks jutting with oak beams, steel girders. People still lived inside the raw shells, at least in the more stable ones, second and third and fourth floors like platforms now, stages on which families waited and watched, hoped and prayed, their daily subsistence turned into the dioramas of museum exhibits.

It sometimes shames me to admit that I've always found a grotesque beauty in devastation. Seared landscapes and charnel fields and cities that lie writhing for block after pulverized block, they're all works of art in . . . whatever is the opposite of progress.

And yet, in the midst of it, life continues. Beauty – *true* beauty – endures. Grass as green as Ireland sprouting against the sooty gray of broken masonry. A fresh-cut rose laid by an unknown hand atop bricks, as if to remind them what red really is. An old man, one eye turned milky blue by a cataract, taking the gift of a sandwich in his tobacco-yellowed fingers and ripping it in half to share it with his droop-tailed dog.

The lens sees all, passing no judgment but approval.

On the First Day of Creation, according to a very old story, God divided the darkness from the light, and called the light good.

No recorded value judgment on the darkness this early in the experiment, although it appears to have acquired a bad rap soon after.

But photographers, at least, have been grateful for the act ever since.

After we got our gear stowed in our hotel rooms – which brought back fond memories of the Khyber, Doolan joked – all five of us headed for the roof. Something we always did naturally. Everybody seeks high ground in wartime.

From this lookout, beneath an evening sky gray as slate, we scanned what remained after the latest onslaught upon Baghrada. We looked down upon nearby streets and distant roads, and the scattered signs of life within. Death too. Always death. Death doesn't just walk in these places – it swaggers. We saw workers using makeshift gurneys to carry three bodies exhumed from rubble; from elsewhere came the inconsolable wail of an unseen woman in mourning, until she was drowned out by the faraway chop of helicopter blades, the staccato chatter of small-arms fire.

And God help us all, tired as we were, for the way we perked up at that. We wanted to be there.

The Barnetts were filming already, camera balanced on Geoff's shoulder and Lily doing an impromptu voiceover. She's always had this way of looking camera-ready even after two

hundred kilometers of rough road. And as I watched them work, I suppose it was not without envy.

Eventually the two of them, and Doolan as well, went back down to leave me alone with Midori.

"Why don't you marry her?" Doolan had asked me in Budapest, before her plane had arrived. "By now, you're probably the last two people left on earth that could actually live with each other."

"It's not for failure to ask," I'd told him.

"What's that prove?" he'd said. "Asking's always come easy to you."

True enough. Over the past twenty years, three other women had already said yes. Then they'd all eventually said forget it. Nothing against them. The fault was clear. It wasn't so much the danger – during my entire career, I'd been wounded only once, although close calls hardly come any closer. A piece of Russian shrapnel had sliced a chunk from the back of my neck. A different angle and it could've chopped out vertebrae and spinal cord.

Instead, my marital failures came from having doomed myself to a life of restlessness no matter where I woke up. Whenever I was home, I was itching to be out in the field. But after I got there, I missed whoever and whatever I'd left behind so much that it was like a toothache. Whatever happiness I was chasing around and around, it felt like I was always 180 degrees on the other side of the circle from it.

So they left us alone, Midori and me. Because, in close quarters, you really can't keep much of anything a secret from anybody.

We'd held each other in some strange places. A rooftop in Baghrada and the smoke from a dozen distant fires were as normal to us as a park would be to others. Then we always ended up going our separate ways. Even though I still dreamed that one day the same window and its unchanging view would finally be enough for us.

"I never told you," she said. "The day the World Trade Center was attacked, I was in San Francisco."

"You should've called me." Because Midori had never seen where I lived in Seattle. Just as I'd never seen her apartment in Tokyo.

"I had planned to. But then that happened, and I realized we both would be going to Afghanistan soon. And that that would seem more real."

I knew what she was really saying: that neither of us could have enjoyed the other when we both knew the kind of war that was imminent.

She pointed at one of the nearest smoke plumes, followed its climb with her finger.

"After the attack, those cheap newspapers you have in the queues at markets, on their covers they showed photos of the burning towers. But they'd retouched the clouds of smoke so it appeared that devil faces were in them. I thought it was such a shameful lie at the time. But maybe in that there was a kind of truth after all."

"I thought Shinto didn't believe in the devil."

"The world is bigger than Shinto. I don't know what to believe."

I nodded, because there were times I had sensed it too, walking upon bloody streets or battlefields and recognizing with painful acuity that here was a place bereft of anything remotely resembling God. Instead, a void had been left.

Rarer, but worse, were the times when even the void seemed absent, because something else had filled it with a lingering residue of terrible purpose. There had been times when I'd focused upon slaughter with one eye toward truth and the other toward aesthetics, and it was as though something had been peering over my shoulder, looking at the same scene, the way a bricklayer might stand back to inspect his pattern.

I heard the snap of a shutter, fell back into the here and now to see that Midori had just taken my picture. I always found it hard to tell her not to do that, because it felt like bad luck. Not that she would've listened. To her, war has all kinds of faces. And to me, she'd always been a small force of nature with a mop of glossy black hair, as immovable as a rock in her determination, and her age a secret, in that way of Asian women.

She would give her heart more easily to refugees, I think, and maybe they sensed that, even if they couldn't speak a single word of the same language. In country after ravaged country they would look at Midori with such openness and yearning it was as if the most wounded regions of their souls were naked to her, and her gift in return was to show their plight to the rest of the world. She could look at eyes and reveal entire histories.

"What were you thinking then?" she asked, camera lowered. "You were so far away."

"I forget." "And now you're here with me again, but you're lying."

"When I was growing up, I had all these books about World War Two," I told her, because I had to give her something. "I didn't actually read them much, except for the captions under the pictures. Everybody always remembers the famous shots that stand on their own, like raising the flag on Iwo Jima. But I was always most drawn to those shots that felt like freeze-frames, one slice out of an ongoing story. I'd look at a picture of a guy jumping out of his foxhole, or ducking for cover, and I'd wonder, 'How much longer did this guy live? Did he ever make it home?'

"I've never forgotten this one picture of a pair of German soldiers. Not an action shot, they were only looking at the camera. It must've been near the end of the war, because one of them was just a kid. At the time I didn't know enough to realize they were drafting boys by then. His face looked so incredibly smooth and his helmet was too big for him. It looked like the cap of a mushroom on the stem. But the other guy . . . you took one look at him and just knew he'd been at it ever since 1939. He needed a shave and had this thousand-yard stare. I used to wonder what he'd seen to look that way. So . . .

I guess what I was thinking a minute ago . . . is that I know. That's all."

It still had a hold on me, that war, in ways that no others have. Particularly the German side. I've never felt that I've fully understood it, or that it even can be, but I'm not talking about factors like resentment over the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. What mystifies me still is what could so totally consume a nation and its rulers as to gear them toward war with such ruthless efficiency. From top to bottom, an entire society mobilized for destruction, disposal, and conquest, and yes, there were those who were immune to it, but they were few. It's always frightened me that one country, so small when seen in context on a map or globe, could overrun its neighbors and fix its sights on the rest of the world, then continue to pour forth resources both human and material, erupting like a volcano, until it exhausts itself from within.

And I marvel at the way beaten men, who could not all have been evil, could turn over their rifles, turn around, and walk home to live out the rest of their lives in peace, as if they've only come through an especially bad dream.

Never again, the victors say, pledging vigilance, and they mean it with every fiber of their being. But they all die off eventually, and good intentions don't make for much of an inheritance.

So it frightens me sometimes, that if something like Nazi Germany could happen once, it could happen again, somewhere.

I let a thing like that slip, though, and people usually just scoff. *What are you worried about? You live in the only superpower left.* I don't find that nearly as comforting as they intend it to be.

Midori and I were still on the roof past nightfall, when the darkness became one with the mountains and the streets, and little pockets of the gutted city below us began to glow with unquenched fires.

"If I were to die, while working, and you were there," she said to me, "would you take my picture?"

"I don't know." Could I really be that cold-blooded? Strangers were one thing, but Midori? Just contemplating it hurt my heart. "Would you want me to?"

"That's what I'm asking," she said, because once again I'd misunderstood her. "Would you please take my picture?"

Sometimes I dwell on battles and aftermaths I'll never see, never can see, because time and technology have superseded them.

I consider the proximity required to fight with swords and battle-axes, with maces and war-hammers, when you really would have to wait until you saw the whites of their eyes. And the red of their wounds. I think of the savagery and the damage, easier to grasp than that of two-ton bombs, yet more nightmarish too, because it all came down to muscles: limbs hacked to cordwood and kindling, faces and chests pounded to jelly, heads cleaved from their shoulders.

How colorful the ancient killing fields must've been, those sprawling banquets for ravens and wolves. Not just the blood, but the shining metal and the dyes used for the bright proud banners under which they fought and fell.

And the noise, the pageantry. The cacophony of thundering drums and bagpipes and huge blaring horns. War as theatrical production. They must've found it terribly exhilarating as they stamped toward one another unleashing their fiercest cries.

At least until all they could do was crawl.

Over the coming days we networked, cultivating relationships among the locals to work as guides, drivers, translators. We made some vital inroads with the officers of the militia and planned excursions along with them as their campaign continued. Geoff and Lily filmed an interview with the commander who now had Baghrada under martial law, and who seemed cool enough on the surface, although experience told me he was sweating out the possibility of a counterattack by Codrescu's army.

We'd been there almost a week when I received an invitation to the police station, a forbidding gray building now used as a military headquarters and, as I learned, a holding area for prisoners regarded as more important than garden-variety soldiers. They had one now, a wounded colonel in Codrescu's army, left behind during the retreat and captured two days earlier trying to escape over the border where we ourselves had entered the country.

"We thought you might enjoy a chance to hear his side of things," said Danis, a lieutenant I'd warmed up to, whose English was good enough that he'd acted as go-between when language proved a barrier. "Of course he lies. They all do when they are caught."

They took me to his cell, and Danis remained behind to translate. At our approach, the colonel scrambled upright onto the wooden cot bolted to the wall and a shadow scurried away. He'd been playing with a rat. Or perhaps preparing to kill it, for food.

He didn't look like much now, wearing ill-fitting civilian clothes instead of a uniform. His left arm hung in a sling, useless after his elbow had been shattered by a bullet. He sported bruises, some fresh, and would've been a stouter man before, but after two or three weeks of reduced rations his skin seemed slack. The only reason I was seeing him now was because the others were finished interrogating him, had spent two days wringing him out like a sponge until what remained was fit only for the monotony of captivity.

I fingered my camera, then thought no, the time wasn't right yet. I wanted him relaxed enough to let defiant arrogance creep back in. I wanted a portrait of a man convinced he was held by people whose blood was inferior to his own. Instead, he looked downright quizzical, as though he thought he should know me.

Danis had a duty guard open the cell door. We had little to fear from the colonel, but they still took the precaution of

cuffing his good hand to the wrist of his wounded arm. We were given stools to sit close enough for normal conversation. I started up a small recorder with a built-in condenser mic and tried a few questions, which Danis relayed. The answers I got back were hardly worth the breath expended, a few words delivered without conviction.

Finally the colonel muttered something to Danis, who looked embarrassed at having to be so rude as to pass it along.

"He, ah . . . says you are boring him. He asks if you have nothing better to do than discuss politics and policies and maneuvers."

"Ask him what *would* hold his interest," I said.

Danis posed the question, and at this the colonel straightened his back against the stone wall. He smiled at me, briefly, then his gaze roamed the cell while his tongue, like the tongue of a frog, pushed out from his jowly face to wet his lips, and his gaze fixed on a small barred window near the ceiling. He had no view here. But he had air.

"Baghrada has always been a beautiful city, yes?" the colonel said, through Danis. "But it is even more beautiful now, I think. You wonder why I think this? I will save you from asking, if you wish."

He waited, patient and confident, knowing that I would nod yes.

"Can you tell me," the colonel went on, "that as a boy you did not once take a frog, or a lizard, and pin it living to a board and cut it open to see what it looked like inside? Can you deny this?"

All the answer he needed must have flashed across my face, my grown-up's judgment of what had been childhood curiosity. I could still remember the window I'd sliced into the bluegill's side; how a throbbing air bladder popped like a tiny balloon when I stuck it with a sharp probe, and speckled my face with pondwater.

"Was it not beautiful inside to see?" he asked, growing rhapsodic while Danis gave me his words in a deadened monotone. "Was it not made yet more beautiful by knowing it could never be made whole again?" He smiled up at the window through which he could see only sky, as though imagining all that lay crumbling beneath it. "Everything else is but a matter of scale."

Over the years I've noticed a quality to certain people, not all of whom were behind bars, but most probably should've been. There is something fundamentally wrong with them, down to the core, and the longer they live, the more it seems to manifest itself in a baseness of appearance that I can only call degenerative. Old serial killers look this way, especially while reminiscing.

As I watched sweat collect in the iron-gray bristles of his hair, then ooze down the creases and folds of his face, I knew that the colonel was one of them. He may have been a military man, but he was first and foremost something else. He blinked little pig eyes and stroked the chapped red skin of his bad hand.

"Imagine a young woman, or a girl even," he said through Danis. "A fresh pretty thing, she has spent her whole life in



one village and knows almost nothing of the world. Her priest may have told her it is a place of miracles and she believes him, because every day she wakes up to mountains. Then imagine the look on her face the first time she is forced to confront all the things that can happen to her and to her body, from soldiers who can do anything they wish, for as long as they wish. She was beautiful before . . . but now she is made . . . perfect . . .

The further the colonel went on, the more difficulty Danis had remaining detached while translating. His breath whistled in his nose. He had three sisters; I knew that much about him. Finally Danis surged to his feet and punched the colonel in the face with one fist, then the other, to knock him back against the wall. The man leaned against the stones and dribbled blood as he laughed.

Obviously the interview was over.

"As you can see," Danis said, trembling, "the colonel is a sick man."

But he still had more to tell, several moments' worth, and Danis looked at him as if comprehending only half of it, if that much.

"What did he just say?" I asked.

"It makes not much sense to me," Danis said. "He says . . . perhaps he has done a poor job explaining the work he does . . . but he says you of all people should understand - I'm trying for the correct word - should understand the . . . aesthetics. Then it becomes stranger still. He says he does not know if what we all seek to appease, whether or not we realize it, is an it, or a them . . . but that it is everywhere, watching everything, and that the rats are its eyes."

Danis paused to spit on the floor near the bunk.

"But as I told you already, he is a crazy man, I think. You should see the book we found in his belongings."

The colonel interrupted again, speaking to Danis but staring directly at me. The unfamiliar words seemed to hang in the air as Danis looked from one of us to the other.

"He asks," Danis said, hesitant now, "if that scar on the back of your neck is still as prominent as it used to be."

I ran the past minutes through my head, concluding that I hadn't turned my back on this man even once. I knew better, a habit ingrained from conversations with fitter, more dangerous men. Even if I had, could he have seen through collars and hair? And so, all I could think of in that moment, again, were the times I'd turned my lens upon slaughter . . . sensing a presence peering over my shoulder . . . so close sometimes I could feel on the back of my neck its cold sigh of satisfaction.

"I don't see any reason to continue with this," I said.

Danis flexed a sore hand and called for the duty guard to unlock the cage.

Maybe because none of us were expecting much from a man in the colonel's condition, this was what allowed him to get as far as he did. When the iron door opened, he was suddenly off the cot and across the cell, bulling into us, knocking Danis and me off-balance and into the guard. His wrists were

still cuffed together, but he could run. He ran past us, over us, up a flight of stairs; ran as though he'd dreamed of this moment for days.

Astonishingly enough, he even made it out of the building and as far as the street. But by then other guards were following. They didn't chase him once he was in the open. Danis and I made it outside in time to see them aim their weapons at his back in an almost leisurely manner.

I've seen men die before, many times. In my experience it's either frightfully quick or agonizingly slow. They drop like stones or linger for eternities. I even filmed it once, my first time in Afghanistan - a Russian soldier crawling from a burning troop carrier in a convoy ambushed by Mujahideen rockets. I can't know what he really saw, but will never forget the sight of him floundering across the ground like a half-squashed roach, his blackened and bloodied face beseeching me through the lens. Ever since, whenever I've heard anyone speak of the glories of war, I've wanted to show them that footage.

The colonel, though . . . he died like no man I'd ever seen.

The bullets only seemed to propel him farther. He stumbled along with gouts of blood splashing the chewed-up street beneath him, yet still struggled on. He ran off-balance, as a man might with both hands bound before him, then another volley finished the job on his wounded elbow, clipping his arm in two. The severed half slipped from the sling and he dragged it behind him, still cuffed to his intact arm, for another ten or twelve incredible paces, until the best marksman dropped him to the street in a heap that seemed loath to ever stop tumbling.

For a few moments, not a one of us could do anything but stare.

Just three thoughts:

Not for a second could the colonel have believed he could escape.

So it seemed to me like a performance.

He died like a man in a movie.

On the Seventh Day of Creation, according to a very old story, God rested.

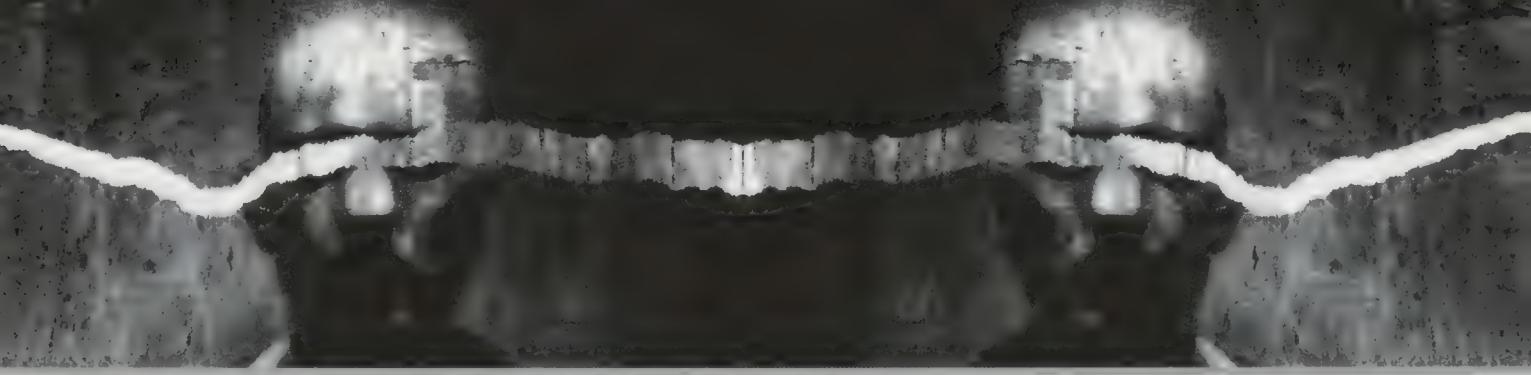
Presumably He thought this rest was every bit as fine as everything else He'd already called good, the just rewards after some very hard work, whose crowning achievement walked on two legs, sharpened spears, and harnessed the power of the atom.

Even today, people wonder when, where, and how it went wrong, a system so exquisitely balanced as this watery blue third planet from the sun, where even the harshest upheavals of nature cannot undermine the inherent tranquility.

The answer seems obvious.

Like a watchman snoring through footsteps, the old Bastard was asleep on the job.

That night, in bed with Midori, I could hardly bring myself to



touch her.

Even under the most normal circumstances I was never unaware of how small she was, although usually this just meant a subtle amazement that no matter how strenuously we made love, I wasn't going to break her.

But that night, even though we both were too exhausted and drained to do anything except lie there, I still could only think of her fragility, how exaggerated it now seemed. How breakable she really was.

By now we all knew about the rape camps, the barbed-wire enclaves deep in the mountains where Codrescu's campaign of ethnic cleansing extended to the next generation. Although they got carried away sometimes, his stallions did.

I'd seen proof.

I'd forgotten, by the time the colonel had been gunned down, that Danis had mentioned a book he'd had on him when he'd been captured. Did I want to see it, Danis asked as they were scraping up the colonel's remains; did I want to know what kind of man he really was?

I did. I didn't. I did.

Danis first had to secure permission; then, in a room in the police station, where they catalogued evidence of crimes in both war and peace, he took the book from a cabinet and set it on a table before me. A hardback book, once slim, now bloated, as if things had been stuffed between its pages. I couldn't read the title, but realized what it was from the author's name. In China, nearly five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, a warrior named Sun Tzu had written a strategy manual so perfect that it was still used in the modern era, by everyone from Mao Tse Tung to Wall Street corporate raiders. At first, *The Art of War* seemed a reasonable thing to find on a military man.

"Just open it," Danis told me.

The text was gone, I saw, made irrelevant, the pages used for backing as in a photo album. Now they were stiff with tape and glue, paste and pictures. It didn't matter where I opened.

The first snapshot I saw showed a blurry uniformed soldier striding out of frame on the right, away from a woman kneeling before a stone wall and above a tiny heap on the ground. A wet telltale blotch stained the stone. I had heard, of course, of babies being swung by their ankles; had never, until this moment, seen evidence of it.

Flip at random to another page, more evidence – this time that the colonel, if indeed he was the photographer, had known firsthand about the systematized defilements he spoke of. He'd known firsthand of many things, even worse, about which he hadn't had the chance to gloat.

There is no need to describe any of the dozens of others. But they lingered. Like a contamination.

I carried them with me through the streets of Baghrada. Sat with them as I ate cold salmon from a can. Took them to bed with me, where I could only bring myself to touch Midori's hip with my cheek and not my hand, pressing my stubbled face against the creamy warmth, above the bone, and I thought,

This could be broken. For sport. They do that here.

No, there's no need to describe any of the others.

Just ask myself why the colonel had indicated that I, of all people, should understand the aesthetics of the work he did.

Mind games, I told myself, played by an insane man who said his work was done for something that employed rats for its eyes. An evil man who collected and possibly even took the sort of pictures I'd always drawn the line at, said I would never shoot. Because I was so much better than he was, right?

Which hadn't stopped me from looking at them.

Every. Single. One.

An insane and evil man who had somehow seen through me to my scar.

On the First Day of Destruction, it's anyone's guess how it really happened.

But it's easy enough to imagine groups of short, squat men cloaked in ragged furs they themselves had skinned, carrying crudely effective weapons they themselves had fashioned by firelight, with total absorption. The skirmish may have been over the fresh carcass of a giant antelope or bison, or a particularly inviting shelter.

The one's hands and thick broken fingernails were stained with the ochers used to create lovingly detailed likenesses of their prey animals on cave walls. But as the cudgel, fired to a hardness near stone, smashed the other's skull into splinters and sent him pitching to the ground, this was nothing like hunting, where lives were taken with an attitude that approached reverence.

It's easy enough to imagine him looking down at the bloodied brains oozing into the dirt, breath gusting like the wind through his broad nostrils, and muttering whatever was his word for good.

Beneath Seattle's rains, in the loft where I sometimes live, sometimes work, and sometimes just stare at the walls, they hang from a line stretched between a shelf and a nail. They hang not like laundry but like snakeskins, clipped at the top and weighted at the bottom to thwart their stubborn tendency to curl.

For those who shoot pictures where the people are shooting each other, there are two categories of work. There are the photos snapped quick and dirty, often digital, sent in for immediate consumption. Then there are the ones we save for later, time capsules preserved in rolls of film; their colors are richer, their shadows starker; we tell ourselves they mean more, that they'll be around longer. That some of them may even be remembered.

As I lift the magnifier to one eye, like a monocle, and lean in close to scan negatives along the wet dangling strips, each one is a surprise, a treat.

I may have developed them, but not one of them is my own. Instead, as I see for the first time what she saw there, I'm peering through her eye.



I see the faces of Baghrada, their rare smiles and their frequent tears. I see the very definition of squalor, throughout a city and a countryside and a populace laid to waste. I see myself on a rooftop far from home, and how she really saw me, and I wonder how she ever could've loved someone so marked by his years and how they were spent, then wonder why she couldn't have loved me just a little more.

I wonder, too, if it's my imagination, or if I really can see better than I used to; if it's true what I've always heard about sensory compensation. Total deafness in one ear, eighty percent in the other – that should be enough to earn a little kickback.

It seems important that I should preserve those last things I did hear clearly. That I should be able to press a button and replay them, if only in my mind . . . and I suppose I can, it's just that I'd gladly give up that last monaural twenty percent to be rid of them.

Laughter. I can still remember the laughter, and how it drew us.

She'd made arrangements to head out the next morning on a trip to one of the rape camps, liberated but with many of the women still there, because now it was an impromptu field hospital. With the colonel's picturebook still so fresh in mind, I wanted to ask her not to go, but knew what an insult this would be.

The Red Cross is there, I told myself. She'll be fine.

Laughter.

As we walked near the hotel, it came from a block away, or two. We stopped, because hearing that sound was like seeing the sun again in a world of night. We'd heard so little laughter since coming to Baghrada. Better still, it was the laughter of children, lots of them. Anything that was causing this much joy, in this place, was cause for us to run, to immortalize it before it could disappear.

And at first, as we came upon them, it seemed so normal. Just a group of boys at play in the middle of the street, laughing and cheering during a spirited game of soccer. The same scene was probably going on at that same moment in Berlin and Madrid and Dublin and Chicago, places that knew peace . . . but if it could still be found here, then to me that meant there was hope. There was light.

We shot and advanced, shot and advanced, together, but Midori was the first to see, through all the flashing legs and kicking feet, that their ball had a face and a beard and broken teeth.

I find it easy to blame them now, for everything. That if we hadn't sought them out, then we wouldn't have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. That if we hadn't been so transfixed by their laughter, then the reason for its sudden cruel turn, we might've noticed moments or minutes earlier some sound warning us that Codrescu's army had launched its counteroffensive against the city they'd lost.

Laughter, and the shrill airy whistle of an approaching artillery shell – these are the sounds I remember last.

From then on it's mostly imagery, a few sensations. Boys,

and pieces of boys, flying through the air. A sick whirling weightlessness as I flew too. The taste of the street and the wet warmth of blood down one side of my neck as it ran from my right ear. A thickened isolation caused by an almost total absence of sound, the world closing in like a muffling blanket.

Take it, she told me when I found her. Just lips to be read, movements that vaguely matched a hazy muddle of sound at my left. You're bleeding. Wasting neither time nor words, because how could either of us have forgotten her request on the hotel roof? Take it now.

But to do that, I would've first had to let go.

In the legacy of which I've inadvertently become curator, it is the last picture on the last roll:

Midori lying in the rubble, with an arm reaching into frame from the left to cup her cheek. My arm, but it could be anyone's, and that's all that matters. It was unthinkable to me that anyone should get the idea she died alone. Technically the photo is an abysmal failure, marred by a cracked and dirty lens. The world, I think, will excuse these flaws . . . even if it's now a poorer place for her absence.

And so, back to the original conundrum:

Can any one photo come close to capturing the symphony of ruin that is the city of Baghrada?

There is one, but it exists only in my mind, because neither Doolan nor the Barnetts nor anyone else was there to take it:

A man kneeling in a street, calm and poised even though he's surrounded by carnage and chaos. He can manage that because, like a priest administering Last Rites, he has a purpose. You see him only from the back, and even less of the body he kneels beside – an older child or a small woman. They, too, could be anybody, and the ambiguities are important. They are far from the first to be brought to this moment.

But it's the background that really makes the shot: the rising black plumes of smoke in which some might see cruel faces, the shadowy corners where rats scurry for a better view, and all around, a jagged still-life of walls and roofs whose devastation might even be called beautiful. So tragic, made as though by a master artist turned vandal, who in despair has turned against his own epic painting.

We are not only the brush strokes upon his canvas, the scene seems to say.

We are also the bristles of his brush, and the edge along his blade.

Brian Hodge has flung around almost as many words as there are stars in the sky. His most recent works are his third collection, *Lies & Ugliness*, the EP-length CD of organic-electronic music that accompanied its limited edition, the novels *Wild Horses* and the recently completed *Mad Dogs*, and probably more things that weren't even conceived until after this bio was penned. Brian made his TTA debut in issue 32 with 'De Fortuna', and he's also had a story in our sister magazine *Crimewave*, 'Miles to Go Before I Weep', which was shortlisted for the prestigious CWA Dagger.

red and gold paper dragons dipped in

chains across the narrow streets, white flames darting from their mouths in bright-moving dance. Lanterns bobbed in every window, shaded in scarlet crepe. Bill Townsend stood on the steps of his Bangkok hotel, gaping. The evening heat, the confusion of smells – perfume, spices, a trace of petrol fumes – even the grimy plasterwork somehow blended into the exotic. This made up for last month, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service had dispatched him to Turkey for his first overseas assignment. Nothing there but concrete buildings, the poverty tucked behind gray walls.

But this: Bill grinned at the boy on the corner juggling antique coke bottles, the street vendors hustling for trade, a girl with blossoms pinned to her straight black hair.

"Free sample, free sample." A woman in a faded sarong offered him a stick of satay meat.

Bill took a bite: chicken, that tasted like real chicken, and spices he couldn't identify. He gave a five-dollar bill to the woman. "That tastes good. Thanks."

"You like?" The bill disappeared down a fold in her sarong, and she gave him three more sticks.

"What's the festival? Chinese New Year?"

She covered her mouth with her fingers as she giggled. "No festival. Is for you, for visitors. You like?" Bill frowned, framing another question, but the woman turned away and hurried after a pair of tourists. Shadows flickered over his jacket, cast by the flames spouting from the paper dragons. Glancing up at the nearest dragon, Bill spotted the holo-pip glued to its tongue, stamped with the trademark of an Australian multinational. What had he expected? That the locals sat cross-legged on the floor, making the decorations by hand?

He shouldn't be dawdling here, anyway. Pulling his compuscreen out of his pocket, he blinked down at the map. The department's most recent address for Yuan Chi Koon was only a few blocks away. Bill headed left, sweat prickling his back.

Ms Yuan was an anomaly, an immigration candidate who had withdrawn her application after receiving the INS's final approval. That happened occasionally: if a candidate scored highly enough on the aptitude tests, other countries made them offers. But Ms Yuan's withdrawal had caught Bill's attention on a boring day in the New York office. She had returned her citizenship papers folded neatly into quarters in a square black envelope. A sticky residue rubbed off the envelope to cling to Bill's fingertips, oily, redolent of tar. On impulse, he had checked to see which country she'd selected over the US, and discovered that she had retained her Thai nationality.

He turned down an alleyway, stopped. Corrugated iron shacks slanted inward, cutting the view of the darkening sky to a minimum. The noise of the main streets carried to him faintly, but here there was no sound, no motion, not even the rocking of a paper lantern.

He took a deep breath. No need to overreact. They were just slums; he'd seen a hundred alleys like this in VR programs. He edged forward. According to the map, Ms Yuan lived in one of these shacks. Christ, but it made no sense that she wanted to stay here.

Something shifted overhead.

Bill pulled his gun halfway out of its holster before he spotted the two green lights winking above him: standard surveillance cameras, presumably tied into the local Net. He stepped to the left, watched the videos track him, wiped his palms dry on his pants. Odd how much safer he felt knowing that some computer was monitoring the alley.

He walked past another two shacks, paused outside what should be Ms Yuan's home. When he couldn't find a doorbell, he rapped on the loose piece of corrugated iron that must be



the entrance. "Ms Yuan?" No answer. "Ms Yuan?" He knocked harder, and the piece of metal gave way, hinging backward on a creaky spring. He fumbled for a light-switch. A single fluorescent tube came on, its harsh glare exposing a square room about three meters wide. A bamboo mat rested on the bare earth floor in front of a computer terminal. The terminal was disconnected, the loose end of the wire snaking across the bedroll.

Nothing else except – Bill sniffed – tar. He peered around, saw an oily green puddle near the bedroll. Curious, he walked in, bent down to dip his thumb in the liquid. Sticky, and there was a secondary smell, organic, like decomposing vegetation.

His foot caught on the edge of the bedroll as he straightened up. The bedroll promptly unwrapped, shedding pieces of clothing to either side. Bill picked up the garments, stuffing worn shirts and shorts into place as best he could. He shouldn't have come in here. The place had looked so spartan that it hadn't seemed like a real intrusion, but this was someone's home.

He rearranged the bedroll, fumbled in his pocket for a sheet of paper to leave a note asking Ms Yuan to call him. No use sending an electronic message, Ms Yuan had severed her connections to the computer nets at the same time she canceled her application. Remembering his instructions, he scrawled a sentence saying the INS was willing to provide a sizable financial inducement if she would reconsider her decision.

He propped the note on the computer and went outdoors. A group of people had collected further down the alley, but he couldn't make out their faces in the gloom. Despite the reassuring glint of the video cameras, he sprinted until he reached the main street.

Ms Yuan hadn't called Bill by noon the next day, so he ate lunch alone in the hotel restaurant. Between mouthfuls of *phad thai*, he glanced at the news reports. The Japan-Australia Alliance were squashing another protest movement in the former New Zealand; Hendrik Schaal had become the first European to run a mile in under three minutes fifteen seconds; the President had assured Congress that her brother had never given any money to the socialists.

When Bill's news selector popped up a The-Aliens-Are-Coming article, Bill groaned and switched off the display. He was contemplating the dessert menu when the INS beeped

immigrant^s mary soon lee

him. He crossed to the nearest privacy booth and pulled the silk curtain closed.

A stranger in a crisp business suit smiled at him urbanely from the video screen. The tagline at the bottom of the screen showed that he was a department head at the INS. "Mr Townsend, there's no need for you to continue searching for Ms Yuan. We've decided to transfer this case to a more experienced operative."

"Yes, sir." Bill played with the tassels of the silk curtain. "If this is because I intruded into Ms Yuan's house, I apologize. I wasn't thinking –"

"Not at all. No harm done."

"Then could I help with the investigation? This is only my second field assignment, and I'd –"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible." The official's smile grew noticeably forced, and Bill watched the man's fingers drum a nervous rhythm at the bottom of the screen. "We've booked your return flight for seven o'clock tomorrow morning."

The screen blanked.

Bill frowned. First the department authorized him to spend up to eighty thousand dollars persuading Ms Yuan to accept US citizenship, then for no apparent reason they decided to transfer the job to someone else. Why?

Back in his room, he connected to the department's database, and requested the file on Yuan Chi Koon. Nothing: the records had been erased.

Bill flexed his computer stylus into an upside down U-shape. He tried to remember what he'd read about Yuan originally. She was in her late twenties, and her test scores had pushed the high end of the bell curve. Maybe that was all there was to it: Ms Yuan was a genius, and the department had generously decided to save her talents from wasting away in Thailand.

Bill snorted: there was very little altruism left in the US. It was more than twenty years since they'd granted admission to any political or economic refugees. Nowadays you either bought your way in, or proved that you had marketable skills.

The stylus snapped in two between his fists. He stared at the plastic shards. Sometimes he hated the unilateral front of the developed nations – the immigration quotas, the ban on high-tech research in the Third World, enforced sterilization in famine areas.

He tossed the stylus fragments into the trash can. Everyone

could afford to be an idealist in their spare time, but Bill was too conscious of his employability rating to protest against the system.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he strode down to the hotel lobby, grabbed one of the broad-rimmed hats stacked by the door, and walked out onto the hotel steps.

The street was almost empty, the dragons wilting above him in the afternoon sun.

He turned left, his route unplanned until he found himself at the entrance to Yuan's alley. In the bright daylight, the row of shacks looked more miserable than threatening. He strolled over to Ms Yuan's home.

The corrugated iron door was crumpled inwards, sunlight scattering into the small room. The computer lay on its side, its screen broken, fragments of glass splintered across the floor. The bedroll had been sliced cleanly down the middle, the padding pulled out.

"Shit." Bill leaned past the crumpled door, squinted at the mess. A photo dangled from one corner of the computer, a middle-aged couple on a bench, holding hands, a blurred tree drooping behind them. Yuan's parents?

Anyone could have broken in, a vandal, a robber. But something cold turned over in Bill's stomach, and he kept remembering his conversation with the INS department head, the nervous drumming of the man's fingers.

When Yuan's withdrawal notice had landed on his desk, he could have just processed it by rote. It would have been simple. Probably no one would ever have looked at the file again, never cared what happened to Yuan. But instead he had eagerly beavered over to his boss, shown him the application records with Yuan's test scores highlighted – shit.

He backed out into the alley. He wished he had left well alone, first when he saw Yuan's file, second when the department head called to order him to drop the case. But the break-in wasn't his fault. No one could blame him for that.

He walked away down the alley, wondering whether someone in the INS was monitoring him via the surveillance cameras, wondering why he felt like such a jerk. It wasn't as if he could do anything to help Yuan; he didn't even know where she was. But maybe no one else even guessed she was in trouble.

He turned round, went back to the shack beside Yuan's, and knocked. "Hello?"

No answer. He knocked on the next shack, and the next. The door slid open a crack. An old man's wrinkled face peered out at him.

"Hello, I'm trying to find a Ms Yuan Chi Koon. Do you know where she is?"

"Maybe." The door inched further open, and a hand appeared in the gap, palm upward, only a stump where the middle finger should have been.

Bill pulled out his wallet, unfolded a fifty dollar note. He tried not to stare at the stump of the man's finger. His aunt had lost an arm from the shoulder down, but she'd had a replacement grown within a month. Somehow Bill didn't imagine the old man was in line for cloned replacements. "How would I find Ms Yuan?"

The fifty dollars vanished into the building. "Go to the Great Wall Bar. Koon there sometime."

"Thanks," said Bill, but the door was already sliding shut.

Evidently, the bar was in the seedy end of the red light district. The few surveillance cameras had been broken, their lenses spiders' webs of smashed glass. Bill kept his hand on his holster as he walked, trying to gauge whether any of the locals were armed. Although all new guns were skin-coded for a single user and Third Worlders weren't allowed to own them, there were always reports of locals who'd obtained one of the pre-regulation weapons. Or just a knife.

A neon sign flashed above a rickety wooden building: GREAT WALL BAR - TOURISTS WELCOMED.

Bill pushed open the door, and choked on cigarette smoke. Air conditioners whined somewhere in the background, but didn't eliminate the smell.

Two teenage girls perched on stools, cigarettes balanced between their fingers, their bare legs displayed to maximum advantage. Behind the bar stood an older woman, maybe thirty, her arms thickly muscled. Judging by her darker complexion and crinkled hair, she was part-African. She jerked her head toward Bill. "We're not officially open until three o'clock. If you want to come in, there's a fifty percent surcharge on drinks and services."

"I'm looking for a Ms Yuan Chi Koon."

"Koon doesn't work here anymore," said the African woman.

One of the teenagers giggled, her voice too high-pitched, nervous. Bill stared at her: no, she was too young to be Yuan. He crossed over to the bar, straightened as he smelled a trace of tar. He laid a fifty dollar note on the counter, "Yuan's been here recently. Where did she go?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her for a week." The woman had an unusual face, something about her features clashing with her complexion.

"You're Yuan!" Bill said. The woman's body makeup was good, but strip away the coloring and her face became familiar.

A gun appeared in the woman's hand. Fast, much faster than Bill's reactions. The muzzle was mirror-bright, out of place in the dimness of the bar. At the edge of his vision, Bill saw the two teenagers slip off the bar stools and disappear into a back room.

"I'm Yuan. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to help you -" Gazing at the black hole of the muzzle, that sounded so false. His muscles were rigid, anticipating the movement of the trigger. "I saw what they did to your home - I felt responsible."

"Why?"

"I work for the INS -"

Yuan frowned, the gun lowering a fraction. "This isn't about the INS."

"It . . . it isn't?"

"No." She sighed, her look of regret apparently genuine, but she kept the gun trained on his chest. "I'm sorry you got involved."

"Involved in what? What's going on?" Bill asked, trying to keep her talking - the compuscreen in his pocket beeped.

"Answer it."

Bill took the compuscreen out, flipped it open.

"Mr Townsend," said a deep male voice. "This is Rear Admiral Aaron Howe. Go to the nearest privacy booth and establish a video link."

Yuan shook her head once.

Bill looked at the gun, swallowed, looked down at the compuscreen. "That's not possible. Sir."

"Mr Townsend, we know you have information concerning a Ms Yuan. She is a member of a group who have infiltrated secure computer nets through a flaw in the INS datalinks. We need to locate her immediately. Can you help us?"

Yuan shook her head.

Bill hesitated. He could wrestle Yuan for the gun, gambling that she wouldn't actually pull the trigger. The glint of the muzzle snapped him back to reality. Much more sensible to leave the heroics to the army. No one would expect him to risk himself.

"I think I saw her, near the prison on the other side of town," said Bill rapidly, and Yuan nodded in approval. "She was headed for the airport."

Yuan switched off the compuscreen, her eyebrows lifting. "That will help, but they will still send a unit to check this location."

With her free hand, she lifted a plastic-and-steel bundle from behind the bar, all angles and thin wires. She pushed two of the wires together, and the contraption started buzzing.

"What is that?"

"A beacon. I'm calling for help. Now go out the back door, slowly. I'll be following."

Bill walked over, and unlatched the door. The heat hammered at him as soon as he stepped outside. A dirty blue car squatted by the curb.

Yuan stepped up to the car, the odd plastic-and-steel bundle cradled in her left arm, her right hand aiming the gun at his chest. "Get into the car on the driver's side."

The door was unlocked. He scrunched into the seat, heard Yuan get in behind him. Something cold and metallic nestled against the back of his neck.

"Take the third left. Follow signs for the coast road to Chon Buri."

He started the car, both of them silent. As they left the city, the road deteriorated to a bone-jarring track. His hands trembled on the steering wheel. He took a deep breath, tried to steady himself. "So you're a rebel? And now you're taking me to your base?"

"Not exactly." She paused. A stubby tree flashed past the windows, out of place against the background of flat fields. "I've been providing information to some . . . people who want to settle in Thailand. They've offered us their technology, plus autonomy from the developed nations, in return for some land near Chon Buri."

"Offered who? You? The Thai government?"

"I accepted on behalf of the government. It wasn't feasible to arrange a formal meeting."

There was a manic edge to Yuan's voice that scraped at the remnants of Bill's nerves. Glancing up at the rearview mirror, he glimpsed her face: intense, unsettling. As calmly as he could, he said, "What technology? And how can they guarantee you autonomy? What does that even mean -"

"They can do it. Turn right." Bill turned right. The wide gray-blue band of the sea marked the horizon.

An electric whine sounded behind him. He started, his damp hands slipping on the steering wheel. The metal of the gun pressed deeper into the back of his neck.

"They've located the beacon," Yuan said. "Slow down."

Bill braked. A huge green puddle rippled on the road ahead. Where the hell had that come from? The puddle slid forward, accelerated toward them. Bill braked furiously, and the car screeched to a halt, but the puddle kept coming, swept under them. Green liquid splashed up around the car, creating a stench of tar.

In the rear-view mirror, Bill saw the puddle come to a standstill. Reflections caught in its surface, shades of green kaleidoscopic into metallic blue, twisting in a way that hurt to watch as the puddle paused, then headed back toward the car.

"What the hell is that thing?" said Bill.

"The people who're helping me. Or their spaceship. I'm not sure there is even a difference."

The puddle swept past to the left of the car. Its surface rippled, points shifting in a distortion of perspective. Alien, Yuan believed that thing was alien. And for the life of him, Bill couldn't think of another explanation.

"Keep driving. Slowly," said Yuan. The gun twitched against his neck. "They have difficulty stopping. Last time they contacted me, they told me how to make a null-acceleration node so they can anchor themselves. It's just a few hundred meters ahead. Once we lead them there, they can begin manipulating the local environment."

Bill started the car. His skin prickled as he watched the puddle drift along the road. "How do you know what they want? How do you know you can trust them?"

"I don't know that I can trust them. I hope." She shrugged. "Perhaps it depends on your starting point. In my country, nine tenths of the population live below the UN poverty line. We don't have much to lose."

The puddle drew alongside the car. Ahead, to the left of the road, Bill saw a tall branching mass of metal tubing. The air between the tubes distorted weirdly.

Yuan shifted. "There's the anchor! Pull alongside."

He saw her face in the rearview mirror, her expression radiant, obsessed, but he didn't share her confidence. The world was a mess, but it could be a great deal worse.

The gun was a cold pressure point on the back of his neck. He needed time, just a little time to think this through. Shit, he was about to lead the goddamned aliens to their anchor, and he had no idea - Yuan had no real idea - what the aliens meant to do. He wasn't brave, he'd never been brave, but he had to do something, because there was no one else around and no more time -

Bill clenched the steering wheel, pressed the accelerator pedal to the floor, and steered straight for the center of the tall metal tubes.

"Stop!" screamed Yuan.

Time slowed.

He heard the click as Yuan released the gun's safety. The car seemed to creep forward like a fly caught in syrup. He tried to slump sideways, but his muscles were too sluggish. Christ, he was going to get killed, and he wasn't even certain he was doing the right thing. The front bumper ploughed into the anchor, tubes of metal folding around the car like petals.

White-hot pain exploded in his neck, agony arcing through ruptured nerve endings.

An afterimage imprinted on his retina: the puddle shearing against the bulk of the car, disintegrating into ten thousand spinning droplets of liquid. The image blurred, redness stealing across, like the paper dragons in the streets of Bangkok.

Mary Soon Lee's second collection, *Ebb Tides and Other Tales*, was published recently by Dark Regions Press, and she has sold stories to all the major SF magazines and anthologies.

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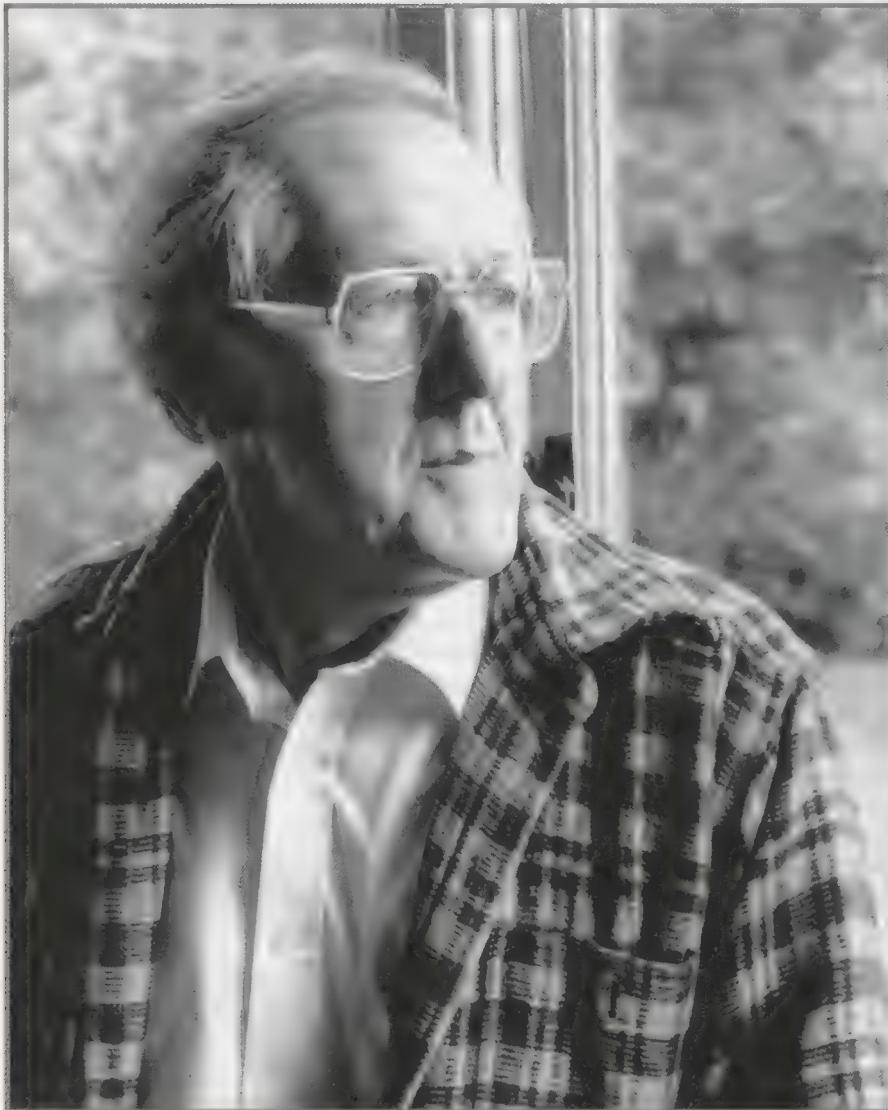
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FROM TERATOLOGY TO TERRORISM

Brian W. Aldiss interviewed by Andrew Hedgecock

Doncaster in the late 1970s. It's Saturday night and the Beethams' cellar bar is wall-to-wall with weekend punks, dogged hippy wannabes and the occasional proto-goth. There's a miasma of smoke, sweat and Brut – even sixth form anarchists were following Kevin Keegan and Henry Cooper's injunction to 'splash it all over' – and the jukebox is belting out its repertoire of Black Sabbath, The Clash, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Be Bop Deluxe . . .

It's a pub with an identity crisis, in a town at odds with itself – there are signs of the social divisions that will become crushingly obvious with the Miners' Strike five years later. A fitting place for a teenager with a hormonally mediated sense of alienation to encounter 'The Bang Bang' – a story about the volatility of identity, disillusionment and mutually destructive conflict.

Six of us are crowded round a table, arguing about where to go next. Julie – who has recently hacked off her Crystal Tips locks to transform herself from fey, garrulous hippy chick to tough, laconic Siouxie Sioux lookalike – reaches into her voluminous bag and pulls out a library book, *Contemporary Nightmares* edited by Giles Gordon. She mumbles her longest sentence of the weekend: "You'll like this – read 'The Bang Bang'."

I feel a bit of a twat lugging a book from pub to pub around Doncaster Market Square but, against the odds, it survives – quite a result for me and the Metropolitan Borough Library. The following evening I read 'The Bang Bang' by Brian W. Aldiss – a troubling tale of Siamese twin rock musicians who share a dormant third head. It begins to worm its way into my psyche as a symbol of disenchantment, discord and the instability of 'self'. And it has haunted me ever since.

Remarkably, my response to 'The Bang Bang' – also adapted into a mesmerizing novel, *Brothers of the Head* (1977) – has hardly changed in the intervening quarter of a century. I'm a bit less certain about its meaning; but the emotions it provokes are every bit as powerful and disquieting; and it remains a razor-sharp indictment of the exploitative nature of the 'creative industries'.

More importantly for me, this symbol-laden laden nightmare was a point of entry to the oeuvre of one of the most versatile and significant writers of our era. At 77, Brian Aldiss remains an iconoclast and dissenter: an impulsive, energetic and prolific artist who has used a huge range of forms (SF, fantasy, autobiography, thriller, political satire, erotica, comedy of manners, black surrealism), often in the same story, to capture the flux, threat and marvels of our era.

He tires of the charge that his work is excessively 'pessimistic' and 'downbeat', and has often asserted that serious works of fantasy and science fiction have to be subversive; to provoke unease rather than a sense of reassurance. *Brothers of the Head* remains one of the nastiest, most memorable and most resonant novels I've read. So when I'm asked to talk to Brian W. Aldiss for TTA, I seize the opportunity to find out more about the story that drew me to his work 25 years ago.

"*Brothers of the Head* is a disturbing book: it came to me as a nightmare when I was staying in a pretty hotel on the North Norfolk coast. I then read a textbook or two on teratology [the study of the causes, mechanisms, and manifestations of abnormal development], and found that the third head is a development known to medical science. A truly ghastly idea. Then, of course, these two sad boys are exploited by the music trade.

"The telling of the story is built along the lines of R.L. Stevenson's 'Jekyll and Hyde' novella: I have various characters giving evidence, thus obviating the godlike narrator, the bane of much SF – you may have noticed its avoidance in *White Mars* [written with philosopher and mathematician Roger Penrose]. By the way, *Brothers of the Head* has been the subject of more film options than any other book of mine."

Bull-at-a-gate Syndrome

Some of Aldiss's most accomplished and significant works are his darkest – and most comical. I'd been planning to ask him about the energies underpinning the development of his novels and stories: what does he focus on first? Scientific, philosophical and socio-political speculation? Or the drive to entertain? On the other hand, his description of the gestation of *Brothers of the Head* makes the process sound more spontaneous than that. Charles Platt, writing in 1980, described Aldiss as an impulsive character. So does he see himself as a creature of impulse – and, if so, has this trait fed into his work?

"Yes, Charles Platt was right. I am . . . I have . . . well . . . er . . . it's known medically as Bull-at-a-gate Syndrome. It's the way the work gets done, the cow inseminated: a bull-at-a-gate approach is generally my way of starting a novel."

We go on to consider the impact of Aldiss's condition in relation to his recent exploration of the seismic shifts in technology, economics, belief, demographics, ecology and ideas experienced by the citizens (and subjects) of a rapidly developing Europe. *Super-State* is a *tour de force* of imagination and analysis – a forensic examination of the way

This idea is at the heart of *Remembrance Day* – a novel delivered in an understated, measured voice that belies the astonishing emotional resonance of its narrative. The book, full of anger at the international arms trade, particularly its 'respectable' (quoted on the stock exchange) strand, is often described as a 'realistic' mainstream novel, but that's never been my take on it. I ask Aldiss if there is a para-rational element to the intersecting lifelines of his characters, or if he feels that the complexity of the modern world means all our lives and fortunes are intertwined?

the totem pole, the greedier you get. From this factor stems one source of our global problems: the greed for oil. Am I advocating going back to the horse and cart? Certainly not. The problem is too complex, too circular for that; we have better dentistry and medical treatment because of fossil fuels and their use. In this respect, the message in *Dark Light Years* remains a viable one. Whereas *Greybeard*, with England reverting to a wilderness, refers more particularly to my garden."

Aldiss's most compelling work – including *The Malacia Tapestry*, the *Helliconia*

I wouldn't think anyone reading *Super-State* would imagine I had mellowed. Not when I seek to prove that all humanity is non-sane – present readership excepted, of course

consumption and technological development are surpassing compassion, empathy and a stewardship of the planet as key concerns of humanity.

The novel is a complex montage – a collective portrait of Europe, forty years into the future – created from a series of fragmented tales and tableaux featuring an ensemble of adroitly sketched characters: terrorists, astronauts, media stars, scientists, party organisers, androids, politicians, the super-rich, the dispossessed and 'The Insanatics' – a group of Neo-Situationist dissenters, conducting a subversive, guerrilla media campaign. It is one of Aldiss's bleakest and wittiest books. So to what extent was this darkly comic vision influenced by the bull-at-a-gate approach?

"It's generally my way of starting a novel. I'm seized with an idea: let's say that when a space team finds a life-form on one of Jupiter's moons, Europa, they will eat it. I then evolve a strategy that will make this idea seem more or less plausible. Say this event happens, as it probably must, not less than forty years from now: what will the European Community be like at that time?

"And then I start to write in great excitement. I dream up a grand extravagant wedding; a deceptively ordinary start until we find the bridegroom is marrying an android female. Then there are jokes about a can-opener being needed on the honeymoon. And when the wedding reception is at its height . . . a horde of wild horses invades the pitch. I love it! I am encouraged by it. I go on writing and inventing things, complicating matters, following two families in particular through the maze: the Strohmeyers and the Potts. I never know what will happen next – so I stay interested.

"From the start I have in mind philosophical, scientific, and sociological matters to bring to my feast. They are the bread and meat of the meal: the wine is provided by the characters, their love affairs, their destinies."

The complex interaction between the fates of seemingly unconnected people is one of the recurring themes in Aldiss's work.

"You speak of the para-rational. I believe in it and disbelieve in it. Certainly science cannot pretend to explain everything; nor could the human mind comprehend everything if it were to be explained. Such is the conclusion argued and reached in my next novel, *Affairs in Hampden Ferrers*.

"Unfortunately all our destinies are intertwined. What is acted out on the small stage of *Remembrance Day* we now see being acted out on the global stage. The terrorist attack on the New York Twin Towers has caused us all somehow to be – or to feel to be – involved in a dire historical turning point. This time, it is something more than a small bomb in a Great Yarmouth boarding house."

The conviction that we live in a low-synergy society, characterised by corruption and greed, individual and collective, has been another of Aldiss's lifelong concerns. From his earliest works such as *Greybeard* and *The Dark Light Years*, he has highlighted the fact that humanity has reached a crucial fork in our evolutionary trail: one path heads for a more enlightened and humane relationship with technology; another leads to environmental tragedy and political calamity. So, how does Aldiss feel public attitudes to these issues have changed over the last thirty to forty years? Do his jeremiads from the 60s and 70s retain their relevance? Or does he observe a greater public awareness of the social, political and ecological disasters into which untrammelled consumerism is leading us?

"Consumerism has much to answer for: it is one of the cancers on the backside of capitalism. During the present recession here and in the USA, our leaders urge consumers to keep spending, to keep eating, to keep buying new cars. Indeed, war with Iraq could bring us back to full prosperity. It would do the same in trumps for US Vice-President Dick Cheney, who stands to make millions from an attack on Saddam Hussein – check the statement on page 7 of *Private Eye* number 1063. No wonder he's so gung-ho! Greed is the besetting sin that capitalism encourages – and the higher you climb up

Trilogy, the *Squire Quartet* (*Life in the West*, *Forgotten Life*, *Remembrance Day* and *Someplace East of Life*) and *Super-State* – are hypnotic narratives infused with moral philosophy, savage socio-political observation, psychological exploration and – frequently – scientific speculation. But the author's own perception of his purpose in blending these ingredients is disconcertingly straightforward:

"Perhaps I function best as a satirist; a satirist is a man who loathes his target and yet, from a perverse affection, does not necessarily wish it to go away. Especially, that is, if his target is the human race . . ."

But if Aldiss is casting himself in the role of literary gadfly, is his aim to provoke his readers into saner and more humane ways of looking at the world? And to what extent is this aim at odds with the pressures to produce work that will find the widest possible audience within the population that constitutes the target of his satire?

"A writer's relationship with society has always been debateable; a writer may write to please himself or herself yet still need payment for what he does (Iris Murdoch was such a writer), or he may write purely for the money – no examples needed here; or he or she may write to reform or at least criticise society, as does Doris Lessing, as did Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy still wanted payment, at least at certain periods of his long career. The letters of Russian writers of the nineteenth century contain more references to hard cash than to the soul.

"Much the same can be said of the present day. For myself, I frequently write short stories for my own interest, say to work out a small problem. But a novel means perhaps a year's work, and during that time one needs to eat. By and large, authors are paid scandalously badly; it does not do to work out hours and days spent at the computer in cash terms. One must surely be strongly moved to write in order to produce anything with even temporary merit."

Coitus without orgasm and a bucket of LSD
Inevitably, the way Aldiss is perceived

by readers and critics has shifted over the years. He is still perceived as a literary insurgent by older readers and critics, but I suggest a new audience – readers who weren't even born in the days of the new wave, when Aldiss, Ballard and Moorcock were opening up new vistas of possibility for the SF form – is more likely to see him in the role of 'Old Master'. I ask if he's offended by the term, and whether he still sees himself as a restless iconoclast.

"I wouldn't think anyone reading *Super-State* would imagine I had mellowed. Not when I seek to prove that all humanity is non-sane – present readership excepted, of course. But I don't make a profession of being non-mellow. Iconoclast I certainly was. Fans threatened to break my legs when they first read *Billion Year Spree* – cretinous illiterates that they were. Of course things have settled down a bit over the years. But I am a constitutional non-joiner. 'Old Master' must be one of the least offensive terms people use!"

For me, Aldiss was never more of a non-joiner than as the author of *Barefoot in the Head* (1969), a work that fizzed with linguistic and structural innovation. Very much a work of its era, the story retains much of its obsessive, visionary clout. I ask Aldiss to what extent the book was a response to the psycho-social shifts of the 1960s.

"Much of it was written on the hoof, as I travelled round Europe and Scandinavia

and Loughborough. Life was going on, drugs were going in. It occurred to me that it merely needed an ill-intentioned person of Middle Eastern origin to pour a bucket of LSD into Staines reservoir to ruin, not only J.G. Ballard's career, but the entire social structure of Britain. An ideal time for false messiahs to arise."

I ask if the subject matter of *Barefoot in the Head* demanded such a radical stylistic approach: it was, after all, the novel in which Aldiss came closest to ditching traditional narrative structure. Wasn't it?

"I have often questioned the scaffolding of traditional narrative structure. *Report on Probability A*, for instance, has no denouement; it is coitus without orgasm. And in my two most recent novels – I hate to mention their titles again, but *Super-State* and *Affairs at Hampden Ferrers* – subsume their narrative structure into various episodes. In this respect, and this alone, *Super-State* was a rehearsal for *Affairs*, which perfects the technique; a small Oxfordshire village being a rather more manageable setting than an entire united Europe.

"And what of the narrative structure of *Cretan Teat*? In which the ancient and ropey old 'author' gradually takes over from his own narrative flow, interrupting and slowly forming a parallel story. This novel, published last summer, is underrated. It's funny, smutty, clever and serious. Why not buy a copy today? Published by Stratus. But I

digress . . ."

A less than independent evaluation of *Cretan Teat*, but one with which I can't argue. Nevertheless, I'm determined to drag Aldiss back to the time of *Barefoot in the Head* and the new wave. So I remind him of an introduction he wrote for Pan's *Decade: the 1960s* collection, in which he summed up the spirit of that era: 'Reality trembled in the sixties. As many of us discovered, when things settled back into place again and the music died, life ceased to be quite so much fun.'

So what were the possibilities opening up for writers forty years ago? And what does Aldiss think we lost when the music died?

"The 1960s were certainly a vital time of change, when the winter garment of wartime and its restrictions was flung away, the mentality engendered within it. The Romans became Italians, to employ a phrase I was all too fond of using at the time. There were new lifestyles springing up, which journals such as *New Worlds* under Mike Moorcock certainly echoed. Characters were more likely to do coke than do Mars. I took little part in that; I went off to Yugoslavia with a new girlfriend for the better half of 1964. To my great advantage. I'm less sure about hers; I married her. What did we lose when the music died? I'd say – our youth."

Aldiss's contribution to the development and survival of *New Worlds* is legendary. But what does he see as the durable legacies

COMMANDER CALEX KILLED, FIRE AND FU



All was confusion. Somehow, I had to return to Ingushetia.

Finally I came out of hiding and ran down a side street. Broken glass clattered beneath my feet. I found a tripcar in a courtyard. I pulled the tarpaulin off it and smashed the window.

As I climbed in, angrils winged overhead. They plunged down the narrow street and were gone.

Once I had been a beautiful significant person. Now the car would not start. The inputer told me it was completely out of gas. My de-entropiser to the rescue! One shot and the engine was purring. I flung the car forward, knowing the angrils would be back.

I drove up to the second floor, which continued to the end of town.

The place was a tip. Some angrils were fluttering down to feast. They had a preference for warm living flesh. In the car I was reasonably safe. I speeded up. The radio suddenly announced that Commander Calex had been killed by the patagais. His force had surrendered. It was the end of organised human resistance. You might almost say, the

of the magazine under Michael Moorcock's groundbreaking editorship?

"Sub regno Moorcockiae much was done. The old junk, the Yank imitations, which used to appear in the pages of the old *New Worlds*, were slung out. A more freewheeling style came in, with an acute awareness of a present day which only a few months earlier had been posing as the future. Interestingly, a new mob, far more intelligent than the old, immediately entered our company, changing readership habits, changing conventions themselves.

"Suddenly, SF books proliferated, moving

wave' era was the veering away from outer space themes towards those relating to psychological, inner space. But in the 1980s and 1990s traditional SF material was granted a new legitimacy. I ask Aldiss in his role as SF historian (his *Billion Year Spree* and *Trillion Year Spree* remain essential tools for any informed critic of the genre) and as a writer who has continued to make imaginative forays into the far reaches of several galaxies, what were the drivers for the reclamation of 'outer space' as a vital and interesting theme.

"Outer space never really went away. It

forgotten, who wrote massive series about the pleasures of war in space, where no one could hear you scream 'Kamerad!'. Now British writers such as Colin Greenland and Iain M. Banks have brought new talents to bear on such matters."

Dirtying it up a bit

In his long writing career, Aldiss has occasionally explored the potential of horror in his novels and stories. So what was the attraction of the genre, and did it open up the same possibilities for his work as SF?

"I have no great fondness for horror as

There is talk of British SF undergoing a renaissance. Unhappily, such talk is confined within the narrow frontiers of the SF communities. What if we held a renaissance and nobody came?

from the back of bookshops, next to astrology and UFOs, right to the front of the shop, inside the door. Amazing! You know the old riddle: 'What's the difference between a pizza and a science fiction writer?' Answer: 'A pizza feeds a family of four'. But suddenly in the sixties this cruel and truthful slur was no more. We all became rich and famous and commented on Apollo moon flights on BBC TV and things, and travelled the world and met pretty publicity ladies working for fashionable publishers. Of course it was too good to last. Like everything."

One of the key characteristics of the 'new

was just that the Sputnik and the crude lumbering Saturn rockets awoke us to all the practical difficulties of space travel. But space, 'the final frontier', had always been the test bed of SF. If you wanted to make your father really mad, you told him you believed men would walk on the Moon and Mars. 'How dare you believe that? You'll never make a good chartered accountant!' The difference is that nowadays even chartered accountants believe that space travel is at least possible . . . Who brought space travel back? I suppose Pournelle and Larry Niven and those American writers, names

a main course, as the whole story. It's best used as a condiment, the chilli in the stew. You may know that wonderful *coup de theatre* in Sheridan LeFanu's *Uncle Silas*, where the vulnerable heroine is taken by night to a hotel: she and the reader discover together that no, it is not a hotel, but the mansion she thought she had left – and no one has an inkling about where she is . . . That I think is really horrifying, though there is nothing supernatural about it."

Aldiss has often expressed contradictory views about the vitality and relevance of the SF field. In one article he'll celebrate

TRY AT EDGE OF WORLD, SCONES PERFECT

end of civilisation.

I wept as I drove. The radioscan picked up a foreign station radiating from near Tbilisi. Using the linguadux, I heard a professional voice repeating the news of the Commander's death. They said he was being eaten by patagais.

They announced that patagais and angrils were one and the same species, larval and imaginal forms being stages of the same loathesome creature's life cycle. Useless knowledge, I thought.

The world beyond my screen certainly looked as if civilisation had ended.

Broken trees stood or fell everywhere. Cataracts of mud plunged down the mountainsides. Despite the heavy rain, a castle burned, the red eyes of its windows flickering, its smoke pouring heavily downwards. I swerved along the road to avoid boulders.

When the asteroid struck – had that been only ten days ago? – it ploughed into the plateau in central Spain. Madrid was immediately destroyed, lock, stock and barrel. The shock wave started the world burning. The angril brood was released from the interior of the asteroid.

Angrils hatched from the heat. Their rate of reproduction was phenomenal. It had not yet been precisely calculated – and probably never would be.

I passed what had been a camp. Crushed human bodies gleamed like fish in the wet. From some corpses, a white whiskery fungus grew. The savage invaders would feast on them in due course.

My speed slowed. I was climbing into a more extensive mountain region.

Featureless geology surrounded the vehicle. Rivulets spewed from gulleys onto the road. As I rounded a curve between enclosing cliffs, a lone figure ran into the road ahead, waving its arms.

This might be a decoy for hidden brigands. But there was no place here for men to hide. My impulse, nevertheless, was to run the gaunt creature down.

"Stop!" said the punchiputer. It cut the engine.

The tripcar slithered to a halt. The gaunt creature came alongside, wrenched open the passenger door, and climbed barefoot and sobbing into the passenger seat. It oozed water.

I regarded it with distaste. It mopped its face with the hem of its black robe. It smoothed back its disordered hair. It revealed itself as a female. Opening its gown, it revealed two slender breasts, shiny with moisture. The skeletal being was a woman, and no mistake. She also produced a short dagger, pointing it at me to show her nudity was no invitation.

"I have no intention of touching you," I said. "Who are you, anyway? Where have you come from?"

She responded swiftly in a tongue I did not understand. The linguadux was no help; her dialect was unlisted. It was a tribal tongue, lost somewhere here on the fringes of Daghestan.

The woman slumped back in her seat, taking from her inner pocket an object she began to gnaw. Disgusted, I saw it was a severed human hand. Two fingers had already been eaten to the bone. Tales of cannibalism in these wilds had reached me.

I spun open the window and gestured strongly to her to throw the revolting object away. She growled and spat.

"There's better food where we are

the enthusiasm and willingness to tackle new ideas of the SF community; in another he'll despair at the stagnation of conservatism within the genre. So does the genre retain its vitality in terms of finding new ways to describe a complex and unstable world? And, if so, which of its practitioners are writing stories that constitute essential reading if we're to get to grips with the twenty-first century zeitgeist?

"Oh, certainly I have made contradictory statements from time to time in a long writing life. I am myself a bundle of contradictions. To sustain my many defeats and poor little victories, I must, despite contrary evidence, regard myself as a genius, and geniuses find no need to be consistent. However, at present there is talk of British SF undergoing a renaissance. Unhappily, such talk is confined within the narrow frontiers of the SF communities. What if we held a renaissance and nobody came? And what about Iain Banks? A one-man renaissance! I will not name more names, as I am sure to forget the one really vital name, the name I most wished to name. No writer will ever give me as much pleasure as did Phil Dick in his long heyday. I am now too familiar with the somewhat limited number of tropes available.

"But in order to engage with what you rightly call a complex and unstable world, the deadly realism of the older type of novel is surely inadequate. That is why much

present day SF has a strong flavour of the fantastic to it. How else to cope with reality?"

His credential as an iconoclast may – as we have established – be intact, but Aldiss has always been eager to celebrate the early classics of SF, horror and fantasy. His novels drawing on the fictional frameworks of 19th Century novels (*Frankenstein Unbound*, *Dracula Unbound* and *An Island Called Moreau*) are dazzling inventions. But what led him to believe the symbols and ideas of the originals should be speak to a contemporary audience?

"Of the three novels you mention, deriving from earlier scientific romances, all stem in a way from *Billion Year Spree*. I decided when I had written that book that in many respects Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the most daring, as it has proved the most durable. Go to Machu-Picchu in the high Andes, go to the source of the River Nile, or to Ayers Rock, or to the mouth of the River Amazon – or even to Headington High Street – and there you will find someone to whom the name 'Frankenstein' is familiar. That may be thanks in part to Boris Karloff and Universal Studios. Having finished my history, I determined to write a novel in parallel with Mary Shelley's novel to erase the dominant horror aspect; the impulse was in part exegetical, in part admiration. The story of Mary Shelley and her creature, the embodiment of her own orphaned feelings, is a magical one; she does indeed 'speak

to the mysterious fears of our nature', just as she claimed to do.

"*Moreau's Other Island* (the title is in part Shavian, if anyone recalls that adjective, since Shaw wrote a play called *John Bull's Other Island*) was a rather less creative exercise, born out of affection for the Wells novel. I saw a way of bringing the Wells tale up-to-date, with genetic mutation taking the place of vivisection. And my villain, Mortimer Dart, is a thalidomide victim; he is born on the same day as my daughter Wendy. So a deep vein of feeling underlies this rather transparent novel . . .

"Whereas *Dracula Unbound* had ignoble, mercenary motivations. Roger Corman and his wife Judy and producer, Kobi Jaeger, came to dine with the family and me when we lived on Boars Hill, near Oxford. This was just before he started filming *Frankenstein Unbound* with John Hurt. I told Roger that he would have to film its sequel. When he asked me what that was, I told him, *Dracula Unbound*. 'You write it, I'll film it,' said the ever-agreeable Roger. The rest is hardly history.

"I eventually wrote the screenplay, being careful to pitch Bram Stoker's home in our house on the hill. I thought it would be fun to have some filming there. But my screenplay was too elaborate, and Roger's film of my novel was not the great success we had hoped for. So I turned the screenplay into a novel – which is why it reads rather like

AN ENGLISH DREAM BY BRIAN ALDISS

going!" I snatched the hand and flung it into the howling dark. She curled up sulkily in her seat.

I shouted at her a Caucasian saying I remembered: "The world is carrion and he who seeks it a dog!"

A rain shower struck our windscreen. It turned rapidly to hail. The hail also disappeared as we climbed. Now it was snow, flying at speed almost horizontally through the passes.

"Commander Calex is dead," I said aloud.

"Commander Calex," she repeated.

As tears began again to trickle down my cheeks, she too started to cry. Her grief had a passionate intensity. I laid a consoling hand on her shoulder, whereupon she wailed more strongly. I stopped the tripcar.

We huddled together, mourning the loss of everything once valued, I and this lost woman. She was ageless, her long face with its aquiline nose betrayed years of struggle drawn on its sallow cheeks. When the snow storm died, we could see there was fire at the edge of the world. A sullen steady fire,

with centuries to burn in.

An eagle fluttered like transistorised tissue before our windows. I glimpsed an angril on its back. Cascading feathers, the bird plummetted down into the abyss, to be lost in spume and weather.

Fatigued though I was, I decided to drive on. We had not too far to go now.

Both weather and terrain grew even wilder. A thunderstorm blew up. I turned on the silencer. At one stage, we passed a village perched as insecurely as a bird's nest between towering crags. Rain water gushed from its gutters into the depths below. A banner waved from its walls. Then it was gone as we rounded the next curve. The woman slept from exhaustion, her damp head against my shoulder.

Darkness was on us – a darkness stitched with flickering light.

All through that night I drove. The woman slept on, breathing heavily through open mouth. Towards dawn, when ragged signals of day tore through the eastern skies, I pulled into a side gap and was instantly asleep.

Morning came clad in a sullen green. The wind had died to a breeze.

Our limbs were stiff. We climbed out of the car and pissed, one on one side of the vehicle, one on the other. Then on, on.

When the day was half-used, the weather blew itself out. Doves of drab-hued angrils flew overhead, like machines in a wretched dream.

The terrain became less broken, although signs of destruction were everywhere. We came on a notice, half-broken, which read INGU. The frontier hut had been burnt down, and was deserted. But we had unmistakeably arrived in Ingushetia.

It was nearly teatime when we drove into the capital. This quiet little place – a refuge when the Russian-Chechen war was in force – had suffered serious destruction. A mosque survived, a whole terrace of houses, an office block. Yes, much remained intact, and no angrils were about. Not a single soul was to be seen.

"Smarten yourself up," I told the woman. Suiting the action to the words, I went to the rear, washed my face and hands, combed my hair. I passed the comb to the woman. She came, meekly

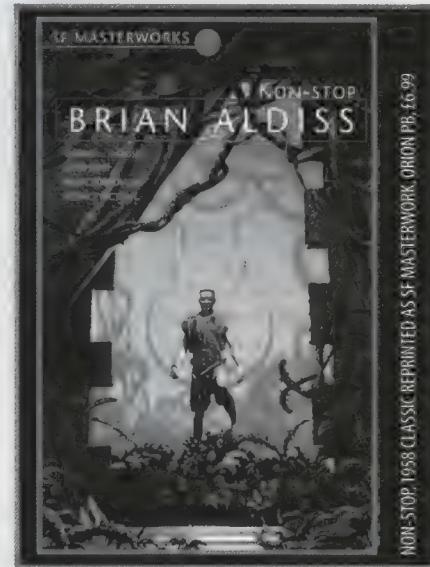
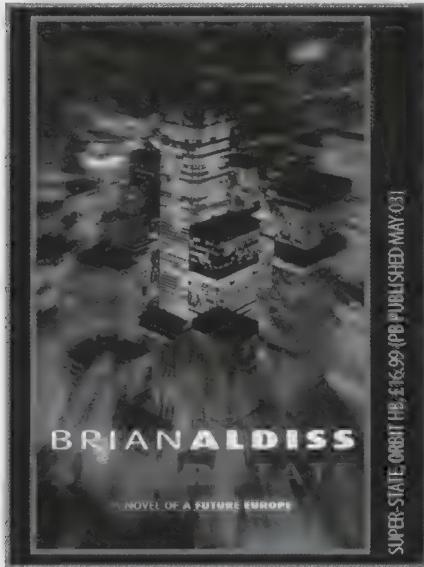
a novel converted from a screenplay."

Throughout Aldiss's work he's dealt with sexual themes in a frank and often humorous way. From *The Male Response* to *The Cretan Teat* via *The Hand-Reared Boy* he has tackled various kinds of sexual obsession head on. There's no difficulty in accessing sexual material these days: the TV schedules are crammed with programmes about sexual experimentation, sexual attraction and sexual identity. Few see it as 'dangerous' subject matter, and yet sex remains a foreground theme for many creative artists.

So why has it continued to engage Aldiss? And how do his readers and publishers react to the way he writes about it?

"We live in a society packed with two, three or more sexes; the subject of sex is constantly in our minds. Of course you write about it. The rather prissy popular SF with which I grew up was totally mute on the subject – or else totally inept (see, for instance, Hugo Gernsback's *Ralph 124C41 +*). I had to have a go! *Primal Urge* was an early attempt. And, as you say, *Male Response*. While my English publisher was asking of

the manuscript that I 'cleaned it up a bit', my American publisher was asking me to 'dirty it up a bit'. What a contrast in cultures! *Hand-Reared Boy* was an early attempt to popularise masturbation, whereas my more recent *Cretan Teat* attempts to popularise cunnilingus. Serious though sexual matters are, they are – like all serious things – a subject for comedy. In *Affairs at Hampden Ferrers*, the sex is less explicit but the novel overflows with love, a kissing cousin of sex. 'Love is the new black,' as some idiot may be about to say."



enough, washing her face and hands, combing her long hair. I found a ribbon, a red ribbon, and tied back her hair.

She made no protest.

We then drove a little farther, turning down a side street. There I parked the car. Taking the woman by her arm, I led her to the tea shop.

The tea shop! Its window box was still bright with geraniums, its windows clear, its door freshly painted! In one corner of the window was an unobtrusive notice: DEVONSHIRE CREAM TEAS. What a beacon amid a world of desolation! The bell tinkled as always as we entered.

We were greeted by that delicious homely smell of baking cakes. And there was Wun Luk to meet us, sprucely dressed as ever, bow tie in place. He called to Fiona to appear as he came, hands outstretched. "Guess who's here, Fiona!" There was a smile on his broad cheeks as he clutched my hand.

Wun Luk was a renegade Tibetan monk. He had married his Scottish Fiona five years previously. They had set up this teashop in the Islamic city, and made a great success of it. A Hovis sign on the wall read NO POLITICS, NO RELIGION, NO GLOOM. PLEASE. People from five continents came here for a cup of Fiona's tea.

Fiona herself came bustling forward, wiping her hands on her apron. She

embraced me warmly. She had put on a little weight, which suited her.

I introduced the woman at my side. Fiona and Wun Luk gave her a warm welcome – as indeed they did all their customers.

"How's business?" I asked.

Wun Luk beamed and pointed upwards. "Chunks of Madrid still flying over. So folks stay in the doors . . ."

Fiona shrugged and smiled. "Aye, it's a wee bittie slack the noo. Ye ken, the world falling apart – it distracts yon customers." She laughed. "Cannae help it."

"What can't be helped must be endured," said Wun Luk jovially. We all laughed at that.

The room looked beautiful. Music I thought I recognised as one of Percy Grainger's compositions played softly in the background. There were hunting prints hanging on the walls, together with pictures of Highland cattle.

Candles glowed under red shades on every table. A turbanned man was sitting with a woman in a head scarf at one table; she was laughing quietly at something he had said.

How Fiona and Wun Luk managed all this I will never know.

Fiona took my strange woman by the arm, leading her with gentle gestures to

her private back room. I discussed with Wun Luk his difficulties in obtaining fodder for his cow.

Fiona returned escorting a vision in a light blue gown. She had a blue ribbon in her hair. It was a transformation! She herself was aware how good she looked.

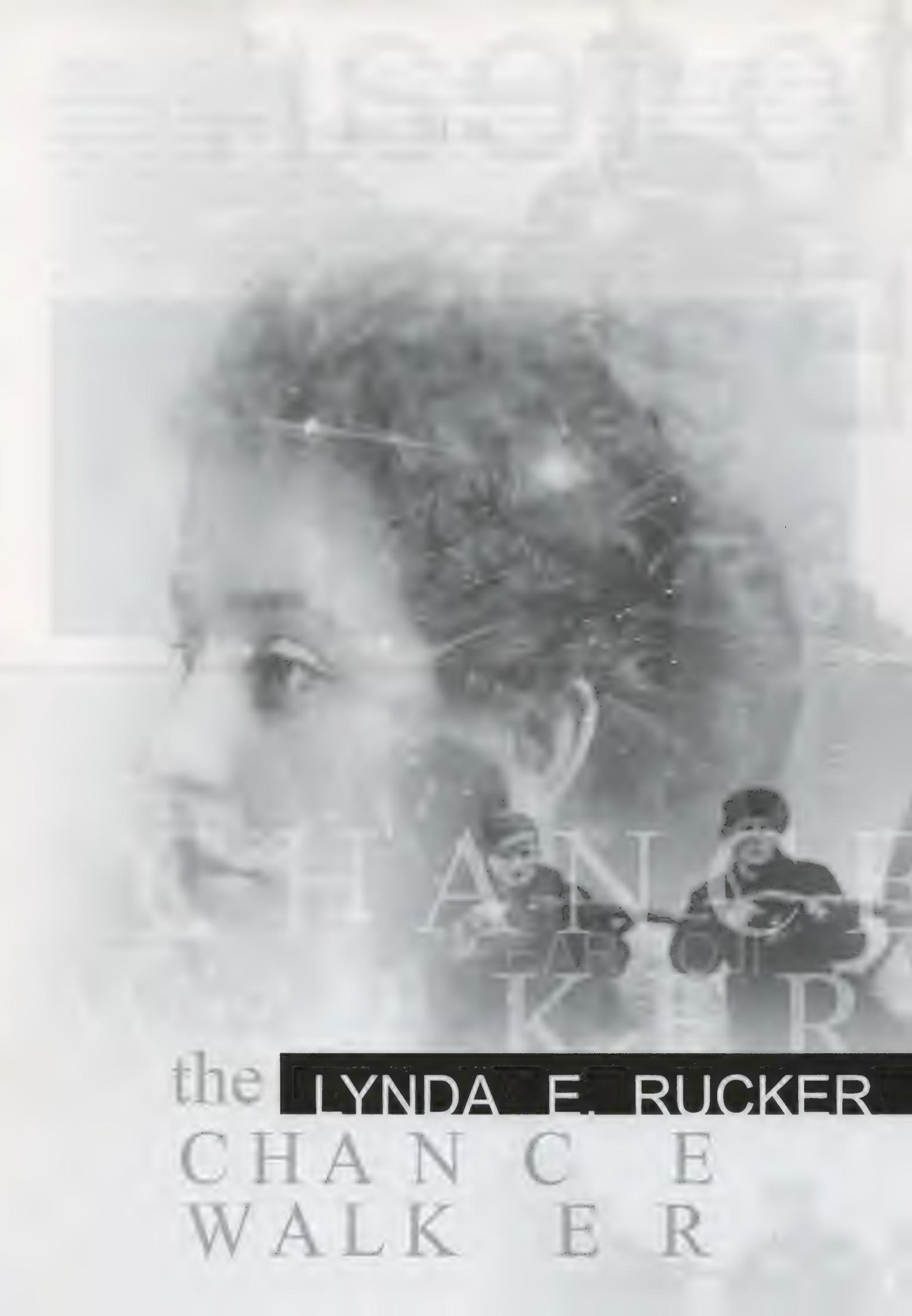
"Her old clouts were gey mankey," Fiona explained, laughing. In an aside to me she said she had confiscated the woman's dagger for a wee while. "Sit yersens down and make yersens at home," said Fiona. "I will bring you a bite of tay."

Hardly had we settled ourselves down that she appeared beside us with a loaded tray. This was her 'bite'!

Her service was as prompt as ever. What a spread we enjoyed, this unknown woman and I! Of a sudden, she said, "Cream tea!" Those were the first words of English she spoke. She gazed at me with eyes of love. Wiping my lips on my linen napkin, I leaned forward and kissed her. "Yes, cream tea, darling . . ."

Our pot of tea, snug under its knitted tea-cosy, the scones baked to perfection with crisp serrated edges, the little pots of raspberry jam, the generous helpings of clotted cream . . . All served with refinement on patterned crockery.

What a feast we had! Well worth travelling a thousand miles for . . .



the **LYNDA E. RUCKER**
CHANCE
WALKER

This whole country is haunted. Can't you feel it?

The chance walker slouches as he moves up the sidewalk below her kitchen window, engulfed in a crumpled brown suit and a shabby hat, smoke swirling from a cigarette she cannot see because his head is lowered, and then he's gone, vanished into the shadows further up the street. He never wears a coat. He never seems to need one.

To fear. *Bat se. I fear. Boji.*

Kathleen, poring over her lesson plans, has made a long list of food and restaurant related nouns and written them on small scraps of paper in preparation for a game the following day. She is uncertain as to how it will be received. The informality of the language school where she teaches is an affront to some of the students there, Czechs who bristle at attempts to mimic American informality with the casual use of their first names, with games and songs alongside serious study. "This is for children," one man had told her, disgusted, and she has to agree it's not the most efficient use of their time. But she has been hired as the token American, which is to say she must be spirited and fun-loving and spontaneous, even when she feels anything but. So a game it will be.

And someone's hammering at the door of her flat. Kathleen hesitates; it's got to be another resident, because it's late and the building has a locked entrance. She can't muster the energy to cope with the language barrier, and instead presses her face against the window. The chance walker is back, and her hot breath clouds the pane so that now it's a ghostly night he tramps through. The knocking ceases and his footsteps are audible again until the sound of a car engine overtakes them.

Bal, bani. You fear, she fears.

Headlights swing round the corner and pin him momentarily against the building on the other side of the street. As the car dwindle away into the distance, the chance walker is gone.

But the rapping at the door has commenced once again. Kathleen heaves herself up from the table, relenting. She fumbles with the lock and when the door swings open there's a girl on the other side of it, tall, in her mid-teens, smiling broadly to reveal small, even teeth. The girl is draped in an enormous long coat and has brown hair pinned up at the nape of her neck. Kathleen has a curious sensation in the split second it takes for her eyes to settle on the visitor that she somehow *changes*, that something smaller and hairier and not quite a girl is waiting there. And there is a sense of crowding on the landing, as though the girl is pressed in on all sides by a multiplicity of visitors.

"Hello," says the girl who is most certainly a girl, and clearly all alone. Her English is precise and perfectly enunciated. "My name is Renata. You are a teacher, aren't you? I would like to learn English with you."

"Now?" Kathleen says stupidly, sleepily, then collects herself. She has encountered it before – the flawless speaker convinced of his or her inadequacy. It seems unfair to charge them anything, and yet they always insist.

"It's a little bit late," she tells the girl. "Why don't we make

an appointment for you to come back another time and we can discuss it?" Czechs are in love with appointments, she's found.

Disappointment flickers across Renata's face. Kathleen notices that she has a large book tucked beneath one arm and nearly relents, but she doesn't want students thinking they can drop in anytime for an impromptu session.

"Tomorrow," she adds, by way of softening the dismissal.

Renata waits, frowns a little. "The same time tomorrow?"

"A little earlier, please. Eight o'clock?"

Renata thrusts the book at Kathleen. "I want to be a doctor. I will study in London. Or maybe America."

It's an antique edition of *Gray's Anatomy*. "Where did you get this?" Kathleen eyes the copyright date – 1918 – and is dubious about its usefulness, although it's not like the make-up of the human body has *changed* in the last century.

"My grandfather. He is a doctor as well." Renata goes on to explain: she hopes Kathleen will assist her in the pronunciation of words like pericardium, epithelium, and medulla oblongata. She's undaunted by Kathleen's ignorance of the subject. Kathleen decides to postpone a discussion about the relative merits of an anatomy book nearly one hundred years out of date.

"Let's try it for a little while and see how it works out," she tells Renata. She wants to leave an opening for the girl to bow out of the lessons without embarrassment, something she will surely want to do once she realizes Kathleen's useless at biology.

"Good," says Renata, nodding, and "Fine. Yes, thank you," and Kathleen, nodding as well but yawning too, shuts the door and resists the urge to open it immediately and make sure the landing is empty again. It occurs to her then to wonder who told Renata an English teacher lived there, or how she got into the building in the first place.

The chance walker. Kathleen has seen his picture in a book of paintings she almost bought in Prague, but she set it down while she was browsing in another part of the shop and couldn't find it again. He was walking through an urban misty landscape that was fading at the edges just like Boleslav does on the coldest days.

It's because of the chance walker that she first found her flat.

She has been there for fourteen days. Once it had been a grand residence – before the Velvet Revolution, and the Prague Spring, and the Communists, and the wars. Since then it's been carved up into pieces like a jigsaw puzzle. It's located in what remains of the old town, now just a single street and a crumbling city wall beyond. Winter has lasted forever, frozen walkways and frigid air. The apartment is overheated.

She has yet to figure out the bricked-up window in the bedroom. A crack jags diagonally across the glass, as though the brick wall has grown there, and is exerting a mounting pressure. The window faces a narrow alley between her building and the one next door, which is fronted by a disintegrating

stone façade. The alleyway is inaccessible, blocked by a high wooden padlocked fence, so Kathleen doesn't know if it's a wall built from the ground up or if it's only her window that's bricked over. She had hoped to speak to the distracted older lady who'd shown her the flat in the first place, but that woman – a small brunette with an accent, not Czech, that Kathleen couldn't place – seems to have vanished. Kathleen had tried the number the woman had given her. Either she'd mangled her pronunciation of the questions she'd carefully prepared ahead of time, or the person at the other end of the line was just irascible. The exchange had ended in mutual incomprehension and a phone banged down at the other end. She tried again some days later. This time the phone simply rang and rang, and then the ringing ended and a hollow rushing sound filled the receiver.

She ought to have known better. Her keys had arrived at the school by mail, swaddled in layers of crumpled tissue paper and stuffed inside a dirty manila envelope. A smudged form that looked as though it had been printed on a mimeograph machine informed her of the address to which she was to send her rent. She has not been able to find the physical location that corresponds with the address, but that is no real surprise and she has not tried very hard. It's a safe bet that doing so would leave her lost in a sea of concrete *panelaks*, the cheap high-rise Communist-era housing that swallowed up neighborhoods and villages throughout the country in decades past.

So it is that after fourteen days Kathleen has not asked anyone about the bricked-up window, and then there is the door in the foyer. The door is painted shut, or hammered closed, or is someone's peculiar idea of a cosmetic fixture. The door has a plain wooden knob and will not budge when she tugs on it. She might as well be pulling at a piece of the wall.

She would like someone to tell her what's on the other side.

There are other problems. An irregular patch of wall in the living room, a recessed square that she imagines is the boarded-over opening to a dumbwaiter. At night she can hear it, sliding up and down, sending goods to other parts of the house, perhaps, or people riding from the floors below to linger in the shaft just beyond the walls of her living room. She stands motionless in the middle of her flat at such times, waiting for some sign as to what she should do next. The dumbwaiter always outlasts her, though, and she grows weary before it moves again. Once in bed, she hears it shuddering back into motion.

Kathleen cannot remember noticing any of these peculiarities when she'd first looked the place over. She'd been in a fog, true, distressed about a vicious fight with Ben, her ears still ringing with the words they'd used to sting at one another. She had raced out of the flat they shared – she'd lived in a *panelak* herself then – and had run until she couldn't draw in breath anymore. At the edge of the old town she'd bent over at the waist, gasping at cold shocks of air, fighting sobs, when she saw him for the first time, making his way up the broken

stone street. She named him right away, *chance walker*, just like the painting, and he possessed the same quiet dignity as the man in the book, with his plain suit and deliberate gait. His presence made her feel ashamed of her own histrionics, and as her breath slowed, her tears dried, she wondered, *What must he have lost over these years?* A person ought to be left defeated, beaten, across decades of war and revolution and suppression and sorrow, yet nothing in his demeanor suggested such a thing.

She followed him partway up the street until the woman called to her in English. "Yes? You are looking for a flat?" the woman shouted. "Yes. Yes, I am," Kathleen called back, and the woman laughed when she added, "Yes, I want it. I'll take it."

"Don't you want to have a look around it first?"

Kathleen didn't; didn't care, really, what it looked like, as long as it could be hers, and quickly, but she stepped inside for a perfunctory glance.

It struck her, then. "I didn't have an appointment to see a flat, actually," she said to the woman. "Were you waiting on someone else?" But the woman assured her no, that Kathleen was just the person she was expecting. It didn't seem right at first, to have snatched it from under the nose of someone who'd legitimately been interested in the place, who probably had made arrangements and then been delayed. Later on she would decide the woman was right after all. The flat ought to have been hers from the start.

The next morning begins with one of Kathleen's favorite classes, four housewives learning English for fun. They bring in glossy gossip magazines and the five of them *tsk* over the antics of the royal families of Europe. They fill Kathleen in on the doings of the Czech Republic's top voice dubbers for foreign television shows, stars in their own right.

But it's downhill after that. She leads another class through a boring reading exercise, and they gaze at her with blank expressions until one says, "Colleen never did it that way." Colleen is the teacher they had the previous year. She lives in Vienna now and tutors the children of diplomats and wealthy businessmen. Kathleen is often compared to her unfavorably by this particular group. She has never met her but hates her with a kind of casual offhandedness.

And then she's asked to substitute for one of the afternoon prep classes. She used to teach one of these herself until she requested a change; Ben had some of the same students at the local high school, and she feared they might bring news of him through a kind of osmosis. Traces of him might cling to their sweaters and coats and hair like the snow did, and she couldn't bear it.

"Okay, then, Kathy?" Ludmila's the stylish, energetic woman who runs the school, dedicated, kind, shortening to the hated diminutive because somewhere along the way she's gotten the idea that all Americans love nicknames. It's not okay. It's a class Kathleen has never liked. She only wonders why they

She named him right away, *chance walker*, just like the painting, and he possessed t

don't remind her more of herself at that age. She imagines there's something altogether more knowing behind their eyes, a cool sophistication that she still lacks. They are teenagers who never knew the world their parents must weary them with stories about, teenagers for whom tales of interrogations and banned literature and secret police must seem as distant as segregated schools had to her, growing up.

Ben told her she was being paranoid once she admitted she felt like they were laughing when she turned her back on them. He'd taken to life in Boleslav, though, and she had not. She saw only grey, unfriendly people, while he made friends right away.

Ludmila is concerned about where she is living. That part of town is unsafe, she says. Where precisely is this flat again? She shakes her head when Kathleen tells her. She didn't know there were any flats to let in the old town. And she isn't finished with her. "Klara tells me you stopped going to language lessons, Kathy. Are you quitting the class?"

The language feels like a cruel trick, with its declensions and cases, genitive and accusative and dative and then everybody uses so much slang that none of it ends up making sense anyway. The grammar's so convoluted that even simple sentences confound her, and the townspeople are unused to hearing their language butchered by foreigners and tend to be unforgiving of mistakes.

"No," Kathleen says, weary. "I'm just taking some time off. I have a new student. Maybe you know her. Renata, I don't know her last name. Tall, about sixteen, wants to be a doctor?" But Ludmila shakes her head.

"It's weird," Kathleen says, "she just came to my door. She heard an English teacher lived there."

"Boleslav is not Prague," Ludmila says with a smile. "It is still unusual to have Americans with us here. Germans, Russians, Yugoslavians, we are accustomed to that."

"I'm still studying some on my own," Kathleen says. It's a little bit insane if she thinks about it too hard, how thoroughly her ignorance of the language isolates her from even casual interactions with strangers. She may pass two men with raised voices and can't tell if they are angry at one another or merely opinionated; she cannot ask for directions or order food in a restaurant without the help of a phrasebook and can only inquire about the time if she spends several minutes putting the question together beforehand. Once she had Ben, at least, to talk to in the evenings. Now that she lives alone she thinks if it weren't for her job at the school she might disappear altogether.

Kathleen walks home in an icy dusk.

The woman across the landing always wears curlers in her hair. She scuttles; there is no other word for it. She is slight and washed-out looking, and if ever she is on the landing when Kathleen leaves, or comes home, she scuttles back in. Tonight as Kathleen mounts the stairs she only sees the woman's back, and the door slams shut before she reaches the top. She is,

at least, an improvement over Kathleen's last neighbor. That woman had hated them, Kathleen was sure of it. She had lied to the landlord, complained that Kathleen and Ben weren't taking their turns cleaning the landing and stairs as all residents were required to do. She would call down to her friends in the morning when she saw them walking past. "Ahoj!" she would shout, eight floors down into the courtyard, and the sound echoed. Kathleen had tried to avoid looking out the window there at all, the sight depressed her so: dead leaves and ice, the flicker of TV screens in windows, SKINS and ANTI-NAZI LEAGUE and NIRVANA graffitied on the wall below.

"I bet she was an informant before, don't you think? Spying on all her neighbors?" Kathleen said to Ben, and he said she wasn't being fair, that you couldn't make a judgement about a person like that. He made her feel petty and vengeful.

Kathleen has never seen any other residents of her current building, or even heard them, walking or talking on the stairs or the sidewalk outside.

Renata arrives at the agreed-upon time. She will not shed her coat, in spite of the blasting radiator. She sits across from Kathleen at the kitchen table, her face wan and small above the voluminous folds of cloth. She opens the book at random and begins to read a passage. "The axillary artery, the continuation of the subclavian, commences at the outer border of the first rib."

"Wait," Kathleen says, but Renata, perhaps not understanding, carries on undaunted. Kathleen suppresses a yawn, lulled by the repetition of unfamiliar words. Renata might be speaking some other language. Rain patters dully against the window, indicating the temperature's finally slipped above freezing. Later the walkways will be sheets of ice.

"Wait," Kathleen says again, and this time Renata does pause. Tap, tap, tap go the footsteps outside, and the chance walker rounds the corner. The rain doesn't seem to touch him at all, and Kathleen wishes for streetlights so she can be certain.

"He is only my grandfather, waiting for my lesson to finish," Renata says. "He told me I should go to you to improve my English."

"But I don't know him at all."

Renata shrugs. "It does not matter. You don't have to know something for it to know you."

"Someone," Kathleen corrects her, "know *someone*," and later on, after Renata has gone and she's lying in bed with her back to the bricked-up window she wonders if Renata did mean *something* after all.

Kathleen wakes the following overcast Saturday and finds she can't stop thinking of Ben. Maybe the time apart has been good. She had been hard, no, impossible, no, nearly impossible to live with. And she misses him. She misses shopping with him at the grocery store, where they'd surreptitiously consult their dictionaries to decipher words on the packaging, making sure not to purchase lard instead of butter as they'd done their first week there. She misses sharing an unreasonable

he same quiet dignity as the man in the book, with his plain suit and deliberate gait



outrage at the way the stern old pensioners would sidle in front of you to break in line. Those things had seemed funny when they did them together; now they just depress her. She misses their trips to Prague, strolling along the Charles Bridge and exploring the winding streets of the old city, the bookshop where she'd bought the Mucha prints and the old man had wrapped them for her like a present with careful trembling hands, and the view from the castle, a sea of crooked red rooftops.

She sets off in the direction of the school and turns toward the outdoor market, where Czechs and Romanys and Vietnamese immigrants are hawking cheaply made clothing and bootleg cassettes and CDs; past the 24-hour bar where factory workers fresh off a shift are downing enormous bottles of Pilsner at nine in the morning, past the bus station and then she cannot remember which way to turn next. Here is the non-stop, where you could buy something to eat late at night if you could remember the word for it – all the food is kept behind a counter and guarded by an unsmiling matron – and now a salon, the cinemas ahead. She sees the high-rise housing beyond, stretching all the way out to the hills where World War Two era bunkers dot the landscape, constructed in anticipation of a German invasion and never even used. Now she's lost among the *panelaks* and she's not even certain she's anywhere near her old building, and it's so cold the inside of her nose feels frozen. A woman beating a rug in the stretch of dead grass between buildings is staring at her. Kathleen only wants to go home.

The weather is worsening, too. Heavy black clouds are rolling in, and freezing rain has begun to blow against her face. Kathleen makes her way down a hill to the Knedliky, the supermarket where they'd shopped together, but she stands helpless in front of it, turning a few times and unable to recall which direction would take her back to the place they'd shared.

She leaves the Knedliky and heads to the center of town, pelted by rain. She spies a restaurant and stumbles inside for shelter. But it's not a restaurant, it's a bar, filled with men, mostly drinking alone and in silence, a reek of despair about the place. They swivel round and stare at her, hostile. She steps in a puddle of vomit as she backs out the door. She's freezing and exhausted and soaking wet when she finds herself trudging down the broken stone street of the old town again at last, and she sees him ahead then, the chance walker, small and bent over against the wind.

He's gone long before she reaches the entrance of her building. Renata is there, however, wearing the same overcoat as always, patiently gazing up at Kathleen's window, her back to the street. When Kathleen says her name she jumps.

"I didn't know we were meeting today," Kathleen says.

"Of course," Renata tells her, and Kathleen isn't sure if she means *Of course you didn't know* or *Of course we were meeting*. Kathleen remembers again that it's important to be firm.

But, "Come on in" is what she says, and Renata trots up the stairs behind her, and it's horrible, having her here at a time

like this, when she's cold and exhausted and afraid, and the last thing she wants to do is talk about anatomy. Then they are inside the flat and she's making them coffee and she's talking too much without meaning to at all, she's telling Renata how she conjugates the words for being afraid like a kind of mantra, to keep it at bay, *bat se, boji*. She tells her how the low-grade fear has been a part of her for so long that she can't recall its origins, or how she felt before it lodged itself inside her. Was it after she came to Boleslav, or had the fear been with her even back home?

She can't stop talking now. The fear seems to consume everything she does, she explains. "Look," she tells Renata, and tosses a letter from her mother in front of the girl. Renata does not touch the letter, in which she would have read Kathleen's mother saying that she sounds so unhappy, why doesn't she come home? She makes home sound like a place Kathleen would want to go back to, which isn't the case. Because Renata won't look at the letter, Kathleen picks it up and reads parts of it to her. Partway through the letter her mother

He's gone long before she reaches the entrance of her building. Renata is there, how



switches from cajoling to admonishments, even accusations: you're trying to run away from us; you can't escape forever; the counselor says this is no solution. Implied: *We made you how you are, damaged you just so, and only we can understand you.*

Renata nods with sympathy and pours the coffee, spoons in the sugar cubes.

Kathleen pulls herself together abruptly with the first bitter swallow. She feels vaguely feverish and wonders if she isn't coming down with something. In the midst of it all Renata has finally shrugged off her coat, and Kathleen sees why she hesitated for so long to do so: beneath it she's wearing a plain old-fashioned dress in contrast to the cheap but trendy clothes the teenagers at school own. Something occurs to Kathleen.

"Do you go to school around here?"

Renata shakes her head. "Not any longer," she says, so sadly that Kathleen would think she was exaggerating her dismay but for the dejection on her face. "Anyway, my grandfather says a woman cannot be a doctor."

Kathleen makes a mental note to ask Ludmila about the girl. There is the difficulty of being in a foreign country: what is the Czech equivalent of Child Protective Services? Does such a thing even exist? And does what seems to her a clear case of neglect count as one over here? Kathleen reminds herself that she has no inkling of the family's circumstances, that perhaps it's only Renata and her grandfather eking out an existence in a strain of poverty which didn't exist in this country before the Communists fell.

As if reading her mind, Renata offers, "We used to live here once, my family and I."

"Here? In this building?" Kathleen asks, and the girl nods.

"All of us," she says, "my whole family, we were all together then. Do you know the history of this part of the city? Near the end of the war the old town was bombed. We never found out if the Germans or the Allies did it." She waved a hand toward the north. "Just beyond, in that direction, is the old Jewish, what is it in English? Section? The part where they lived. Today there are no Jews left in Boleslav."

ever, wearing the same overcoat as always, patiently gazing up at Kathleen's window

"I would like to speak to your grandfather sometime," Kathleen says, reasserting herself as the teacher, hoping Renata only understood about half of what she'd been telling her. She'd been a little hysterical. She would have to watch herself.

"Let's read my book," Renata suggests in response. Her voice is dry as she stumbles over the unfamiliar terminology. "The tibial nerve descends through the middle of the fossa, lying under the deep fascia and crossing the vessels posteriorly from the lateral to the medial side." Renata's quiet halting tone is somehow soothing, and Kathleen forgets to correct her. The *tap tap tap* of the chance walker rouses her.

"Maybe I could speak to him now," Kathleen says, but Renata looks so alarmed at the thought that she drops it.

After the girl leaves she realizes she has an empty afternoon and evening stretching away ahead of her. She spends a little time at an Internet café near the school, writing to her mother, carefully, cheerfully, reading and re-reading before she hits *SEND* to make sure nothing can slip between the lines this time. It is easier to be glib in the not-quite-real world of electronic communication. Something about pen and ink seems to bind her more closely to the truth, which never does anyone much good.

Here is one truth: there was the grief counselor she'd been dragged to with the rest of them (she only went for the sake of her younger brother and sister) who insisted they all just ought to 'open up'. As though abandonment and death can be fixed by talking about it enough. She is reminded of illustrations in the anatomy book: the way the insides look, the yards and yards of intestines and the blood moving endlessly through the body and the pockets of soft useless fat. She is reminded of how their father might have looked after he shot himself, although none of them will know, because they hadn't been the ones who found him – that had been their stepmother, a woman whom they all dislike, and they are confused because they can't help feeling sorry for her now. *I'll stay closed thank you very much.*

Her little brother was setting fires and breaking windows – and once, nearly, their sister's arm, but that could be said to have been an accident.

They were all of them broken in all kinds of places.

Ludmila asks to meet with her, and they do so in a small room off the reception area of the school. Her face exhibits nothing but concern. They are worried about her, she assures Kathleen. It seems Ben has something to do with this as well. He has tried to stop in to see her and she will not answer the door when it rings. It is difficult, Ludmila says, to be so far from home. Kathleen wants to correct her, explain that it is actually very easy. Ludmila speaks in a soothing way, but Kathleen looks for the words behind the words, just as she does in her mother's letters. The school will be closing for one week's break. Ludmila is suggesting that perhaps Kathleen should take a break of her own. A trip to Germany or Austria or even London might do her good. Afterwards they can discuss what role Kathleen might play at the school. Perhaps a

lighter schedule, Ludmila suggests. Perhaps an assistant with the younger children. It will be easier for them to arrange for someone to take over Kathleen's current classes than to never know whether Kathleen will show up to teach, she says gently, without reprove – but Kathleen hears it anyway.

Hears it, and is surprised. She had not realized that she had missed so much time from her classes. She walks home wondering if she's been fired, wondering what she'll do with herself in the empty days ahead.

And this young girl she has been tutoring – who is she, and her grandfather? Ludmila does not know them, and she knows everyone in town. The other teachers at the school have not heard of them either. They are not Romany, are they – Ludmila says it neutrally, but Kathleen's sure there's something ugly behind it. No, she assures her, they aren't Romany, they are solid Czechs. The grandfather was a doctor.

Ludmila shakes her head.

Call Ben. That's the last thing Ludmila says to her. You should call Ben, he misses you, I think.

She can hear the chance walker on the way home, even though he's nowhere to be seen. His footsteps rattle in the street and creep up behind her. Something snatches at her ankle and she nearly cries out, but it's just a sheet of old newspaper blown from the gutter. *Tap, tap, tap.*

Bat se, boji, bal, bani.

Renata is waiting outside the building again. Kathleen wants to tell her to go away, but instead she invites her in. Once upstairs she understands that this is a mistake. She will never persuade Renata to go home now.

Kathleen says, "I've been talking to Ludmila, at the school. She says she doesn't know your family at all."

Renata responds with a sad little smile. "We have been away for a long time," she says.

Kathleen remembers her first sight of Renata, the sense that she was not a girl at all, and the others who were with her. The *Gray's Anatomy* like incantations. The heat in the flat like a fever.

Someone's outside the building, ringing the bell. It occurs to Kathleen that until now, no one has come to visit her besides Renata. Whatever Ben had told Ludmila, she's sure she's not heard the bell in all the time she's been there. And now someone's shouting up at the window. Calling her name. He's using a voice that sounds like Ben's. She won't let him in.

"Kathleen?" says the thing with the Ben-voice. "I know you're in there! I saw you walking up the street!"

It is Ben. And it's like a dream, the kind where Kathleen can't move no matter how much she wants to.

"Kathleen! Let me in!"

Kathleen says to Renata, "Are you ever afraid?" Renata doesn't say anything back. Instead she opens her book and begins to read.

Just before Christmas, one of the teachers Ben worked with had taken them for a drive in the north. They'd set out before

Ben had said once that the past was alive here in a way it could never be in America, Amer

dawn, and stopped in a village near a ski resort, where they'd bought warm loaves of bread for breakfast and the other teacher, Pavel, had insisted that they each down a shot of vodka to fortify themselves against the cold. They'd stopped again someplace deep in the mountains and trudged across a snowy field. Pavel pointed toward the hills. "That's Poland, right there." Kathleen had left the two of them, her boots crunching in the snow as she went forward, and gazed into the darkened forest. That's when she heard Pavel say it.

"This whole country is haunted. Can't you feel it?"

Ben had said once that the past was alive here in a way it could never be in America, America where you went to shed your skin and forget who you were and where you came from. Here, people were crushed by the past. Kathleen remembered old photos she'd seen of Czech resistance fighters, people younger than herself, imagined that their choices and fates conferred a kind of nobility to their doomed features that she and her peers would forever lack.

She could picture the ill-fated Polish army amassing there in front of her on horseback, preparing their futile defense against invading tanks. Nothing was left of any of it now but the soft sighs of wind down the corridors of abandoned bunkers.

Later, on the drive back to Boleslav, it began to snow again. Those first flakes heralded a terrible storm and all across Europe people died, stranded in their automobiles. Kathleen watched the snow swirling through darkened woods that crowded them on either side of the roads, watched it make shapes in the dark.

Renata reads feverishly, bent over her book and hardly mouthing each word before stumbling on to the next one. Ben is still outside the building, now pacing under the window and stamping in the cold, now stepping back to cup his hands round his mouth and shout her name, now pounding at the door again.

Once, Kathleen rises and thinks to slip only as far as the foyer, perhaps to open the door only a very little and see what's there. "You must sit," Renata insists, "my grandfather will be here soon." It is very cold in the flat. It is so cold that Kathleen's breath is showing in little warm puffs of air. Renata says, "It isn't long now." There is ice on the surface of the coffee in their cups. The dumbwaiter is rising slowly in its shaft.

The bricks are tumbling from the bedroom window; she can hear the glass shattering and wonders what's on the other side. Renata's mouth is still moving but without sound, faster and faster, and she tears a page in her rush to turn it. Kathleen's teeth are chattering together. Sweat beads on Renata's brow, Ben is shouting but his voice is far away, the chance walker is tapping his way up the stairs, someone is scuttling down from above. And now there are visitors on the landing, a whole horde of them, and Renata stops reading at last and says, "It's time. You can let them in now," and so she does.

Lynda Rucker's fiction has appeared previously in TTA19 and TTA25, as well as *Darkness Rising* and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*. She lives in Portland, Oregon where she has lately been battling a severe case of wanderlust, trying to write novels, and reading lots of books about Polar expeditions.

ica where you went to shed your skin and forget who you were and where you came from

Electric Darkness



Talk to Chris about Electric Darkness, films, his novels and short stories at www.ttapress.com/discus

Festivals – in the film industry, there's no escaping the fact that your entire year's work leads toward them, then copes with the fallout after they're over. The mother of them all remains the Cannes Film Festival. Having attended this event with the religiosity of a nun visiting Lourdes for well over two decades, I should know more about it than I do, but I'm mainly there for the Market, the amorphous movie jumble sale that accompanies the Festival. So although I fight through the same crowds and parties, I rarely get to walk the red carpet leading to the hallowed *In Competition* film screenings. I've usually seen – or will soon see – most of these films, but it's the grandiose sense of occasion accompanying such premieres that I miss out on. An audience is more predisposed towards a film when it's been introduced by the cast, the director and the mayor (although I once saw a film about Nazism in Berlin which had the invited audience squirming in its seats).

The Cannes Festival disregards the Market, as only the French can allow Art to frown on Trade, and tries to remain aloof, but the Market keeps the Festival in profit. If a film is praised by critics there's often a feeding frenzy among the buyers, but a festival hit has little in common with a commercial success. I also attend as a screenwriter, although I'd be better off as a doorman, because here writers don't count; it's the stars and the directors who create the excitement.

Cannes is the ultimate movie meritocracy, and a nose to thumb at Hollywood, but it can't resist the lure of US films however hard it tries. High-profile American independents are shown in competition, and some years ago the US had a terrific winning streak, but these were by *auteurs*, films one refers to by the director, never the title. We have the Tarantino and the Lynch, the Moretti and the Kaurasmaki, and from England the Leigh

and the Loach, and perhaps now the Ramsey. Clearly authored films interest the festival jury most, and it makes for a fascinatingly varied, artistically valid festival. Films submitted by the UK rarely make much money on native soil. Mike Leigh and Ken Loach are still the only sure-fire UK festival favourites, because they are artistically rigorous, and because, one Parisien producer told me admiringly, they are so realistic about being English. French producers admire artistic rigour, and are dismayed by their American counterparts' fascination with box office tallies.

But are English films realistic? For years Mike Leigh has been sharing his largely misanthropic world view with an adoring festival circuit, and it must be galling when fans insist on quoting *Abigail's Party* back at him because it remains widely enjoyed for making fun of the bourgeoisie. More recently, (and with the exception of the extraordinary *Topsy Turvy*) Leigh has discovered a new style of film, a kind of social realism leavened with a faintly upbeat resolve. This style first appeared in *High Hopes* and *Life Is Sweet*, blossomed fully in the Palme D'Or-winning *Secrets & Lies* and then found itself in competition at Cannes again with *All Or Nothing*. But the style, which carefully satisfies both hard-line art-lovers and more socially conscious upmarket cinemagoers, is calcifying into an odd hybrid.

In *All Or Nothing* Timothy Spall and Lesley Manville star as Penny and Phil, a down-at-heel couple sinking in quiet desperation until a family crisis (their obese son's heart attack) forces them to reconsider their lives. But the consciously drab scenarios and the impoverished participants' comic malapropisms feel concocted by an old luvvie sneering at ghastly proles. By heightening the inarticulacy of his characters, Leigh has created a parody of Britain's working class mentality that revels in presenting doomed people stricken with inertia.

Einstein warned of the dangers of forgetting that life is mysterious, but the directors spearheaded by Leigh ignore this rule. To simply portray one aspect of daily grind over and over is self-defeating. Leigh and Loach shun the otherworldly, the fantastical, the mysterious, the outrageous, the grotesque, the surreal, and the inexplicable because to them such traits seem bogus. Yet it feels bogus to throw black tie cocktail parties in the South of France for films about the underclass. Ken Loach won a best screenplay award for *Sweet Sixteen* and no one would wish him ill for such an achievement, but it makes you feel that directors plot films specifically for festivals rather than general audiences, which rather defeats the object of making films about 'ordinary' people.

To be bloody-minded about this, let's compare *All Or Nothing*'s diametric opposite, *Le Fabuleux Destin D'Amélie Poulin*, directed by Jean-Pierre

All Or Nothing



Jeunet. After *Delicatessen* and *The City Of Lost Children*, both as remarkable for their freeform imagination as for their idiosyncratic design, Jeunet went to Hollywood, where he found his talent misunderstood and misused in the largely redundant *Alien Resurrection*, but *Amélie* proved a hit in France, although the film sparked a rather limp controversy because one or two hard-line critics resented the film's stylised worldview. *Amélie* is intentionally themed around romance and artifice. The heroine's circumstances are peculiarly Jeunet's preoccupations; in her world paintings talk, lamps come to life, and life is filled with secret signs. Overly-imaginative as a child, she puts the wrongs of others to right in an attempt to balance her life, but can help everyone except herself.

The film is an inventive toybox that explores the quirks of ordinary people. So *Amélie* is good at writing backwards because she's used to painting menus on glass as a waitress, and her boyfriend works on a ghost train but moonlights in a sex shop, leading to a scene in which he discusses the problems of love while his colleague stamps prices on dildos.

Amélie is a film about the invention of secret meanings. In the scene where *Amélie* pastes together excerpts from old letters, the soundtrack is also pasted with effects recreating the circumstances under which the letters were written. It is a catalogue of obsessions; lists of characters' likes and dislikes, mad mini-histories of irrelevant events, colour-coding and the careful use of computer graphics. This, you feel, is what all films could be like if only they had the same sense of mischievous imagination. The film was subjected to withering approbrium in the UK press, where Charlotte O'Sullivan described its success as 'depressing'. Why did it draw such flak when the Leigh film was received with rapture? Probably because social realism is preferred by literal-minded critics. You'd think we were the only ones obsessed with kitchen-sink drama, but every country makes such films, and France actually does it better. *Ca Commence Aujourd'hui* (about a teacher's struggle to survive a term in a small French town) and *La Ville Est Tranquille* (about drug addiction in Marseilles) frankly blast the pants off Leigh and Loach.

It's tempting to see the English predilection for social issues as a kind of blindness in which the presentation of inarticulate, desperate lives is more 'real' and desirable in its search for universal truth than the peculiar pecadilloes of a director or writer who uses the tropes of the fantastic to tell stories. JG Ballard famously gained world acceptance with his first non-fantasy novel, and the lesson would seem to be: if you want to get taken seriously, steer clear of the fantastic, avoid imagination.

Interestingly, one French festival that slips by without comment is the International Forum of Cinema and Writing, held annually in Monte Carlo. At this stylish and somewhat secret event, art clearly holds sway over commerce. The four-day gala presents debates, movies and masterclasses with writer/directors like Tim Roth, Christopher Hampton and Patrice Leconte, as well as premiering films adapted from novels, and hosting extraordinary dinners where you may sit and argue with anyone whose work interests you. The emphasis here is firmly on Europe's artistic imagi-



8 Women

nation and the methods of portraying the writer's mind onscreen. I personally learned much more from this kind of open forum than I could have from attending cocktail parties touting British 'realism'. But as the odds of staging such artistic salons in London seem ever more remote, we have to wonder if our loss of imaginative nerve is to blame.

Meanwhile, this year's *Amélie* is *8 Women*, a lighter, more stagebound work that draws no insight from its characters, but instead plays with notions of artifice, and takes the concept of the whodunit to its farthest reach. Naturally, therefore, UK critics can safely allow themselves to detest the entire enterprise for being too fake, too fey, too single-minded. By doing so, the cultural mafia attempts to shift audiences away from the fantastical in favour of the loaded politics of street realism, as if they were mutually exclusive. If they ever come to appreciate – as they did in the sixties – that the fantastic and the real exist within the same writing spectrum, perhaps we'll regain a more inclusive sense of national cinema.

Christopher Fowler

DE PALMA'S WAY



Mike Sutton on the films of Brian De Palma

Brian De Palma

Brian De Palma (born 1940) is one of the few mainstream directors to inspire violent extremes of loyalty and hostility. His fans call him one of the great artists of the 'Movie Brat' generation, while his detractors label him as a plagiarising misogynist whose films are all style and no substance. There is merit in both views but it's fair to say that few of his critics deny that he is an immensely talented visual filmmaker – the debate tends to centre around the use he has made of these talents. De Palma seems to relish the controversy, consistently returning to themes and styles that seem to amuse him, regardless of the reaction of critics or public.

Orson Welles, with whom De Palma worked on *Get To Know Your Rabbit* (1971), said that making a film was like playing with the biggest train set a boy ever had. For De Palma, it's more like owning an entire theme park. From his first works, notably *Greetings* (1968) and *Hi Mom* (1970), he demonstrated a desire to experiment with filmmaking, delighting in show-off devices such as long takes, split screen, outrageous camera movements and overhead shots. In these 'New York' films, the technique and charm of a very young Robert De Niro

blend together with the anything-for-a-laugh narratives to give an impression of kids having a good time with an indulgent parent's camera. The elements of De Palma's later style can be seen in embryo here, and if De Palma lacked Welles's innate cinematic brilliance he shared his desire to push the medium (and the audience) to its limits. De Palma's juvenilia features all the later obsessions: voyeurism, individual versus establishment, complicated relationships and jet-black comedy.

Following a terrible experience with his first studio film, *Get To Know Your Rabbit*, buried by a baffled Warner Brothers, De Palma went for broke with his first mature genre film. *Sisters* (1972) acknowledges his debt to Alfred Hitchcock, his favourite director, by using some of Hitchcock's preferred themes and a strong score by Bernard Herrmann. The film is, however, very much the work of a director whose own personality has emerged and a neat twist on a familiar theme, concerning separated Siamese twins, one of whom is warm and vulnerable and the other homicidally jealous of her sister's sexuality. A journalist witnesses a murder in the twins' apartment, investigates and discovers that only one twin still survives but



has a split personality still containing the remnants of her separated sister. This is revealed in a surreal dream sequence, unique in De Palma's work, in which the journalist becomes the twin who died following the operation. Controversially, the dream sequence features real 'freaks' but these are not used for cheap horrific effect, as in Michael Winner's lamentable *The Sentinel* (1976), but to question the concept of 'normality'. It's a well made thriller with some effective shocks, notably the first killing, the death of the apparent hero which recalls, not for the last time in De Palma's work, *Psycho* (1960) – but it has been overpraised, and it isn't really De Palma's best work as some critics have claimed. There isn't a sufficient emotional connection with the journalist heroine, who comes across as obnoxious, and the amusing secondary characters, notably Charles Durning's sleazy private eye, are underused. It's more a promising beginning in the genre than a fully realised work in itself.

Phantom Of The Paradise (1974), De Palma's second major studio film, is a much more satisfying work, full of invention and stylistics which are, for once, entirely integrated into the film itself, a 'rock opera' which both parodies the form and

is effective in its own right. For the first time, De Palma unblushingly shows his roots in an insane blend of *Phantom Of The Opera*, *Faust*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and a deeply warped version of 1940s MGM songwriting. De Palma's Phantom, wimpish composer Winslow Leach (William Finlay) is a schmuck who is cheated by a reclusive Mephistophelean record producer Swan, played by the sinister Paul Williams. His love for singer Jessica Harper leads him to attempt, but bungle, a terrible revenge on Swan and he ends up pointlessly dead in the middle of a stage, surrounded by an audience who think that his death is part of the show. *Phantom Of The Paradise* is full of visual delights and comic touches but it's essentially a poignant romance and the plaintive tone is one to which De Palma has often returned. The final scene, a crane shot revealing Winslow's body is moving and emotionally complex. *Phantom Of The Paradise* is also De Palma's first brush with the horror film and he shows an affection for the genre in the Gothic touches of Swan's huge mansion and his 'picture in the attic', or in this case a mirror, which eventually, as in Wilde's classic, betrays him.

Following *Obsession* (1975), an interesting but

Femme Fatale

lethargic 'tribute' to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, probably the only film of De Palma's to really justify the charges of theft from the Master – although it's a conscious theft, admitted by both De Palma and the writer Paul Schrader – De Palma returned to the horror genre with his breakthrough film. *Carrie* (1976) is an almost perfect example of adaptation, serving Stephen King's novel without being slavishly faithful to it. De Palma's film improves upon the original in two respects. Firstly, the dialogue is sharper, and, secondly, it foregrounds Carrie's relationship with her mother, turning an efficient horror novel into a probing and believable pair of character studies. Carrie White (the superb Sissy Spacek) is a victimised, bewildered teenage girl, adrift in a world where she is either patronised or bullied. At the beginning, in a sequence which captures the sting of bullying with piercing accuracy, she has her first period and is mocked by her peers when she is unaware of what is happening to her. She reveals this to her religiously hysterical mother Margaret (Piper Laurie) whose reaction is to hit her and lock her in a cupboard. De Palma has the chance with Margaret White to create a truly memorable monster but he refuses, grounding her in reality, thus making her occasional evangelical rages all the more unnerving. He turns Margaret into as much of a victim as Carrie in a monologue which reveals the marital rape which conceived her child and then the compromises which her religion has forced upon her. She is killed in one of the most spectacular death scenes in horror cinema – crucified by kitchen implements – but the image of her corpse, pinned to the door frame then cradled by her daughter is as heartbreakingly apt as it is. These two women are as distinctive and memorable as any female characters ever to dominate a Hollywood film and the psychological insight into them is enough to render bizarre the regular accusation that De Palma is a 'misogynist'.

In contrast to the full-blooded emotional horror of the central relationship, the plot of Carrie's humiliation at the Prom and her terrifying revenge is a little conventional, albeit cunningly paced and staged with one classic tracking shot revealing the

string connected to the bucket of blood which will ruin Carrie's triumph as Queen of the Prom. The only miscalculation comes with Carrie's revenge, all fire and fury but done in a split screen process which distances us right at the moment when we should be most involved. However, the criticism that nothing is made of the deaths of the more sympathetic characters, such as Betty Buckley's nice gym teacher, is valid only if you don't appreciate the jet black humour which subjects nice people to horrible experiences and undeserved deaths.

What clearly doesn't interest De Palma in *Carrie* is the science fiction element of the story; a layman's description of telekinesis supplied by a book is supposed to explain Carrie's talents. In terms of the horror genre, this is adequate but De Palma couldn't care less about a scientific explanation of her powers. Given this disinterest, it's rather curious that he has returned to the SF genre in other films, including his next work *The Fury* (1978). Even bearing in mind the commercial advantages in adapting another blockbuster SF-Horror novel, it's surprising that De Palma was interested in repeating himself so quickly, albeit on a larger scale. John Farris's novel upon which the film is based is considerably weaker than *Carrie* in every sense, containing vast wads of expository material about the pseudo-science behind the bizarre powers of Gillian (Amy Irving), its heroine, and Robin Sanza (Andrew Stevens), the boy whose abilities are misused by the government villains of the piece. This vague description springs directly from the confusion in the film as to what the exact powers are. Gillian and Mark can telepathically move objects, cause blood to pour from people's orifices and, if the final scene is a reliable guide, make bad guys explode – a deliciously funny postscript which takes off from the ending of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and outclasses it for sheer nerve. They can also, on occasion, relive the past based on specific sense memories of the people they touch. Mark can even levitate, at least until he dies in a fall in a sequence which is among the silliest bits of plotting in 70s cinema. As before, De Palma shows no interest whatsoever either in the super-scientific abilities of his characters or in the plot which ensnares them, which is a sort of cross between *Marathon Man* (1976) and *Return From Witch Mountain* (1979). In other words, De Palma doesn't understand, or doesn't want to understand, the possibilities of the SF genre as a narrative of ideas. He has plenty of visual ideas – indeed, the film is a feast for fans of pure cinema, with sequences in slow motion that take the form as far as it can go – but none of them really exploit the possibilities of SF cinema. Given this basic flaw in his approach to the genre, it's somewhat baffling that De Palma spent considerable time trying to bring to the screen Alfred Bester's marvellous novel *The Demolished Man*. By the end of *The Fury*, with Robin's father (Kirk Douglas) dying in an offhand manner and the bad guys apparently winning, the viewer doesn't much care about the characters or the plotting. Which is just as well, since the pleasures of this film are entirely superficial. Yet, and this might be straining the point for some, one isn't too concerned that style has replaced substance because when the style is this extraordinarily accomplished, it is the substance. *The Fury* is one long collection of delirious, beautiful visual

The Fury



concepts which are strung together by De Palma's desire to keep outdoing himself. Aesthetically, it has more in common with Antonioni or Godard than it does with the typical Hollywood blockbuster and while that's not necessarily something to be pleased about – the total disinterest in plot, dialogue and character is a retrograde step – it's undoubtedly some kind of achievement.

The Fury was eagerly demolished by disgusted and baffled critics, but it received enough acclaim from De Palma enthusiasts to safeguard his reputation as a mainstream iconoclast. A small movie made with film students, *Home Movies* (1978), was a pleasant diversion but De Palma had bigger things in mind. *Dressed To Kill* (1980) and *Blow Out* (1981) are rich, brazenly stylish and deeply personal thrillers, taking in influences as diverse as Hitchcock, Antonioni, Dario Argento and Francis Ford Coppola. The former, a commercial success and feminist *cause célèbre*, is a tightly directed, straightforward thriller which plays around with ideas of sex and voyeurism and toys with Hitchcockian concepts without simply stealing them. It's a classic 'witness' plot – a prostitute (Nancy Allen) sees a brutal murder and decides to investigate it herself when the police prove sceptical about her evidence. Somehow, a teenage electronics genius (Keith Gordon), the scuzziest cop in New York Lt. Marino (Dennis Franz) and an expensive psychiatrist (Michael Caine) become involved, most of them spying on each other. De Palma spins this simple narrative into a series of brilliantly directed set-pieces, the best of which are a chase/seduction through an art gallery which is, if not the best tracking shot in cinema history, certainly my favourite, and the untimely murder of Angie Dickinson in a lift shortly after she has enjoyed casual sex with a VD infected stranger. Feminists denounced De Palma as a misogynist, akin to the Yorkshire Ripper and his ilk. But, as a cursory viewing indicates, this film is the wrong target. De Palma takes forty minutes to establish Dickinson as a sympathetic, likeable character, emphasising her frustration at the sexual selfishness of her husband and he gives her time and space to dominate the first third of the movie. None of this suggests a director who hates his female characters. The label also ignores the strong element of black comedy operating. Dickinson's character doesn't deserve her death, least of all for having sex, exactly in the way that Carrie White doesn't deserve to be bullied or Winslow Leach doesn't deserve to be disfigured. It's part of a (rather misanthropic) world view; fate is cruellest of all to the people who least merit it.

This world view is one shared by Hitchcock, De Palma's favourite director and his biggest influence. The Hitchcockian elements of *Dressed To Kill*, which has been described as a rip-off of *Psycho*, are limited to the early death of the heroine and the lengthy exposition of the villain's mental condition. There are two shower scenes in the film, neither of which finishes as you might expect and both of which delight in toying with the accusations of 'pilfering' the Master; De Palma is more than aware that the minute a character steps into a shower in a thriller then *Psycho* is being referenced whether intentionally or not. Otherwise, the films are very different. Hitchcock's film is cold, cynical and emotionless while De Palma's is warm, funny and shot with a sensual eroticism that is a long



Mission To Mars

way away from Hitchcock's frosty obsession with the mechanics of sexual attraction. The two men share a dirty, somewhat childish sense of humour certainly – one can imagine Hitchcock's delight at his successor's ability to get Nancy Allen to strip down to her undies for no particularly good reason – but De Palma seems to actually like his characters in a way that the Master rarely does. Certainly, the ribald, affectionate banter between Allen and her teenage suitor Keith Gordon is considerably more naturalistic than anything attempted by Hitchcock.

De Palma's skill in this film is to throw off assorted bits of technique in a casual manner which is entirely the opposite of, say, a Kubrick who announces his tricks and then does them to death. The stylistics are integrated into the narrative in a way which he has previously not quite achieved and this new found ability is seen at its pinnacle in *Blow Out*. This funny, intelligent and oddly poignant conspiracy thriller won him many new admirers but was a failure with audiences, possibly because the ending is incredibly downbeat and is then capped by a twist which could be seen as cynical or heartbreakingly appropriate. The plot takes off from the famous sequence in Antonioni's *Blow Up* where David Hemmings blows up a photograph in order to see whether he has caught a murder on camera. That picture came out hopelessly blurred, but in this variation a murder has indeed been captured, on audio tape by John Travolta's sound mixer. A political conspiracy is afoot and discovering the truth behind what appears to be an 'accidental death' brings him into the firing line. His attempts to expose the conspiracy through wiretapping Allen succeed only in leaving her dead with only her recorded scream remaining – appropriate, since it is a convincing scream that he needs for the cheap horror film he is working on.

This is an emotionally challenging film which refines the black comedy of *Dressed To Kill* into something darker examining how people use and need each other. Travolta, thirteen years prior to his rediscovery at the hands of De Palma fan Quentin Tarantino, gives an astonishing performance, especially as he listens to Allen's scream over and over again as if the act of recall might bring him redemption. De Palma seems to have set himself

FILMOGRAPHY

1961	
The Story of an IBM Card	
1962	
Wotan's Wake	
1966	
The Responsive Eye	
1968	
Murder a la Mode	
Greetings	
1969	
The Wedding Party	
1970	
Hi Mom	
Dionysus in '69	
1972	
Get To Know Your Rabbit	
1973	
Sisters	
1974	
Phantom Of The Paradise	
1975	
Obsession	
1976	
Carrie	
1978	
The Fury	
1979	
Home Movies	
1980	
Dressed To Kill	
1981	
Blow Out	
1983	
Scarface	
1984	
Body Double	
Dancing In The Dark	
(Video Promo for Bruce Springsteen)	
1986	
Wise Guys	
1987	
The Untouchables	
1989	
Casualties Of War	
1990	
Bonfire Of The Vanities	
1992	
Raising Cain	
1993	
Carlito's Way	
1996	
Mission Impossible	
1998	
Snake Eyes	
2000	
Mission To Mars	
2002	
Femme Fatale	

some deliberate challenges – how do you stage a car chase during the Philadelphia Liberty Day parade? But the stylistics are hemmed tightly into a strong narrative line and used to advance the plot – notably the moment, somewhat reminiscent of Coppola's *The Conversation*, where Jack uses his tapes to recreate the night of the car crash and De Palma switches seamlessly between past and present, exterior and interior while always keeping Jack as the focus of the scene. That we care about the characters as much as we do is also evidence that De Palma has learned a lot since *Sisters*–Allen's death is a shattering moment for us as well as Jack. His collaborators are on their strongest form too – Vilmos Zsigmond's steely cinematography and Pino Donaggio's florid music score seem just what is needed to keep De Palma on track.

Brian De Palma has never quite equalled his achievement on these two films, but his greatest commercial successes were still to come. He remade Howard Hawks's *Scarface* with Al Pacino, setting it in 1980s Miami and wallowing in the period details without always controlling his star. Pacino is immense fun to watch but he chews the scenery, the props, the camera lens and would probably start devouring the other actors were he given the opportunity. As such, the film sees De Palma somewhat subdued with only the hilariously nasty botched drug deal for fans to get their teeth into – the best chainsaw scene this side of Tobe Hooper. Otherwise he seems disinterested and the film drifts on half an hour too long. *Body Double* (1984) was originally meant to be a sex thriller with genuine hardcore scenes starring Annette Haven and then, when this proved too much for the MPAA, intended as a project which De Palma would only produce. He ended up directing it and it's a sloppy piece of filmmaking which is only just above the level of your average made for cable 'erotic thriller'. An unfunny mobster comedy, *Wise Guys* (1986), is another disappointment and it seemed, at the time, that he was in an irreversible decline.

It is in the context of this flat period that the universal acclaim for *The Untouchables* (1987) has to be placed. This melodramatic, operatically styled gangster movie was certainly a return to his best form but it does tend to come across, at least for part of the time, as a slightly anonymous film which is made by a skilled technician without too much personality (something De Palma has hardly lacked in his career). The acting can't be faulted certainly: Kevin Costner's blandness is perfectly suited for straight shooting good guy Elliot Ness; Robert De Niro amuses as the grotesquely bloated and smug Al Capone; and Sean Connery is on top form as the Irish-American cop who leads Ness to the glory which ironically precipitates his own death. Indeed, the great scenes are there and they are wonderful – the trip into Ford territory for the borderline liquor raid, the death throes of Sean Connery as he bloodily crawls along his floor to the strains of Pagliacci and the near-legendary steal from Eisenstein's *Odessa Steps* sequence during which the famous baby carriage duly falls (although De Palma has the wit to use Eisenstein's most famous sequence and then stage a Peckinpah gunfight inside it). But the film is too long and repetitive. With efficient rather than inspired direction and it relies heavily on David Mamet's pungent dialogue and Ennio Morricone's beautiful score to keep it going.

Casualties Of War (1989) is a technically astonishing war film which is among the best comments about the irrational madness of the Vietnam experience, and it has come to be regarded as one of De Palma's best works. The same cannot be said for *Bonfire Of The Vanities* (1990), a miserable experience for the director and not a much better one for the audience. This miscast, badly paced, unfunny neutering of Tom Wolfe's bestseller was a well-deserved flop. De Palma can be blamed for not trying hard enough but it's also clear from Julie Solomon's book *The Devils' Candy* that he tried his best in impossible circumstances. As usual, he reacted to failure by making a movie for himself, the delightfully twisted romp *Raising Cain* (1992), a compendium of his favourite tricks and a showcase for a bravura piece of double-role hamming from John Lithgow.

Since the early 90s, De Palma's work has been at its most frustratingly inconsistent. *Carlito's Way* (1993) is a powerful, moving thriller with an unusually restrained Al Pacino as the ex-con who tries to go straight but has his plans ruined through the machinations of his truly vile, coke snorting lawyer, played with immense skill by an unrecognisable Sean Penn. This is familiar territory but De Palma keeps it tightly paced and brings off some great set-pieces, notably the 20-minute climax during which we hope that, somehow, Carlito might evade the death which we saw at the beginning of the film. *Mission Impossible* (1996) is an expensive summer blockbuster which De Palma handles with his customary skill, pulling off some great visual coups and one set-piece of excruciating tension as Tom Cruise tries to steal a computer disk from a totally secure room. But it's loud, inoffensive and rather bland family entertainment, the main concession to adults being the incredibly complicated plot. *Snake Eyes* (1998) promises a lot more than it delivers, beginning with a lengthy tracking shot during which the entire plot is set-up and then collapsing as obnoxious hero Nicholas Cage moves towards an abortive confrontation with the totally obvious bad guy. Again, De Palma offers some imaginative visual concepts – there's a great scene where a group of hotel rooms is shot from overhead so it becomes like a living chess board – but he seems to lose interest in the plot. Worse still is *Mission To Mars* (2000), a return to the SF genre which comes across as a jumble of *2001* (1968) and *The Abyss* (1989) with neither the intelligence nor the tension. Again, De Palma shows his total disinterest in the SF genre, offering up stale visual concepts, cardboard characters and a predictable plot. It's not even an interesting failure and only the opening tracking shot suggests the presence of a director of De Palma's proven ability.

The disaster of *Mission To Mars* led De Palma back to his roots, yet again, with *Femme Fatale* (2002), as yet unreleased in Britain. The plot contains many elements of his earlier films and the mix of sex and violence promises to arouse some nostalgic controversy. Reviews have been mixed but De Palma's fans seem to be delighted that he's returned to the fold and made a movie for them. Whether or not it's a true return to form remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: De Palma will continue to divide his audiences into the faithful and the sceptical as long as he still makes films for himself, with complete disdain for his critics.



JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

AN EXAMINATION OF THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE RISING SUN BY JOHN PAUL CATTON

'Japlish' is the derogatory word for the kind of disastrous advertising and product packaging in Japan that uses English simply because it's fashionable, with a blithe disregard for grammar or cultural context. Linguistic crimes of this variety include sweets named 'Melty Kiss' and 'Blocky', posters for employment agencies that declare 'Human Skills Up!', cigarette brands exhorting you to 'Feel the Style in Smoke', and so on *ad infinitum*.

Your humble reporter has always been fond of the name of the secondhand book chain 'Book Off'; it shows a certain mischief in its ignorance of cultural traits, as if someone had named it so deliberately. I was trying to explain the appeal of 'Book Off' to a couple of Japanese friends on a recent drive through the suburbs of Tokyo, when the driver's wife turned round to me and said, "But using 'Off' is really popular now. Haven't you heard of House Off and Baby Off?" "Erm . . . no," said I. "Oh yes. And there's another store like that, just up the road." So we drove along a little further, coming out into a leafy avenue leading to a huge retail outlet – and there, in big friendly orange letters, was the sign: HARD OFF.

All tittering aside, it's true that Book Off is now a major player in a recession-hit publishing industry. In Japan as in the rest of the world, high street bookstore chains are putting the wagons in a circle, leaving smaller high street stores unprotected in the dark. Some smaller stores are meeting the challenge by using marketing tricks to survive; specialising in specific genres, using innovative displays, stocking sections of rare and out-of-print books. Book Off is what's known as a 'new-used' outlet, buying at 10% and then selling at 50% of the cover price. Their stores have a warm, welcoming ambience, and are open from 10am to midnight seven days a week. Despite its success, the chain (and its inevitable imitators, such as the sensibly-named Book Market) has its highly vocal critics. One reason

is that authors and publishers receive no royalties from sales at outlets such as these; some of Japan's best-selling authors have claimed losing revenue worth millions of Yen from 'new-used' outlets and lending libraries.

But if these stores are so popular, what are the Japanese actually reading? And what of 'psycho-horror', the genre that put Japanese horror on the map? Well, 'psycho-horror' is still around, but not as much of a juggernaut as it used to be, having been overtaken by fantasy novels in the vein of Tolkein or Rowling. The genre's leading light at the moment is Miyuki Miyabe, who had three books in the recently compiled top ten of 2002's top genre sellers. Her psychological thriller *Mohouhan (Copycat)* has sold 1.24 million copies since its publication in March 2001, and was made into this year's most compelling Japanese film, directed by Yoshimitsu Morita. Also held in high regard is the author Shinpo Yuichi, author of this year's *Yukkai no Kajitsu (Fruits of the Phantom)* and last year's *Hakkaten (Factor 8)*, supernatural mysteries set in present day, rural Japan. One of Shinpo's novels has been made into an immensely successful film, *White-Out*, starring Yuji Oda and released in mid-2000. There has been nothing but silence from Koji Suzuki, the man who started the ball rolling with the novel *Ring* and its sequels, despite the critical success of the recent American remake. Also, there are no signs of an English translation of the novel to be released – which is an indication of how monstrously slow the process is for new Japanese writers to reach an international audience (unless your name is Haruki Murakami or Banana Yoshimoto).

Stepping outside genre fiction and into the mainstream, female authors and readers have played an increasingly significant part in recent years – reflecting how, across Japan's economic and social landscape, it's the habits of the female population that can determine trends or make or break prod-



ucts. The flourishing genre of women's fiction is known as *L-Bungaku* (the L standing for lady, love and liberation), a phenomenon that has its roots in *shojo manga* (the immensely profitable industry of girls' comics). Indeed, out of the top ten fiction best sellers in the first half of 2002, six were written by women.

One of the most controversial releases in the flood of new titles throughout this year has been *Dare ga Hon o Kurosu no ka? (Who is Killing the Book?)* by Shinichi Sano, an examination of the problems of the publishing industry itself. In this scathing book, the author takes a swipe at everyone who he perceives has contributed to a five-year decline in book and magazine sales across the board. Sano's argument, which will be familiar to authors everywhere, is that an overwhelmingly conservative business is coping with the recession by offering more of what readers already are comfortable with. He savages the culture of 'inspirational biographies' and 'how to be successful' books that top all non-fiction lists; the point of reading, he claims, should be to challenge and inform, but in recent times, the best-seller lists are little more than tranquilizers.

Cheap, disposable reading matter consumed as mental comfort food by an un-demanding public?

Book Off!



Miriam arrived on their doorstep in Fulham, unannounced, uninvited. Catherine was out at work. Crews had no other option but to allow her in. She was in a state of agitation, nothing like the model of restraint she'd become since her mother had died, years ago. Crews realised that afternoon how little he knew about Miriam's life after he'd moved away.

She wanted him to leave Catherine.

"This instant," she demanded, with eyes like clouded glass. "Come back to Birmingham with me."

Crews laughed. He regretted it immediately when Miriam's face grew as clouded as her eyes.

"It'll be better for you in the long run. Better for all involved."

Crews shook his head in disbelief. This was bloody ridiculous.

"What's got into you Miriam? This isn't like you."

For a moment the clouds parted, and a flare of anger escaped. "What you have inside you will *hurt* them eventually, Joseph. Catherine. Emily. You don't know what might happen."

This again. "Go home, Miriam," Crews told her. He was concerned that she'd make a scene. Wait for Catherine to

leon is dead

Two Years Later

The shifting light roused him. When Crews opened his eyes, the train carriage was flooded with sun. The other passengers were turning their faces anxiously to meet it before another bridge took it away again. Eyes squinting. A sudden warmth on the skin. It seemed somehow miraculous amongst the factories and high rises, the overgrown backyards.

But then it was gone and the train was pulling into New Street Station. Crews remained seated while the others rose to tug at the baggage above their heads, stretch their legs, pull on coats, yawn loudly. He wasn't tired at all; he'd spent too much time sleeping in the past month or so as it was. Too long mired in something like self-pity in the rat-infested shithole he'd been forced to rent after Catherine had suggested him leaving their home for a time. She'd wanted to be alone with her own pain. Spend hours straying from channel to channel on the TV in order to divert herself from thoughts of Emily. But then she would only return to the lacklustre stone in the cemetery day after day, like a parent looking in on a child in its cot at night. She could not be consoled.

Crews hadn't argued. He'd packed a holdall. Had it ready in five minutes.

"Take more than that, Joseph," Catherine had said, which said more than enough.

He filled a case. All of his clothes. Moved further down the Central Line to Perivale. Lost down a side-road in a damp flat with the smell of Baltis wafting upwards from the takeaway below. Paced up and down. Sat at the window. Slept late. Took two weeks leave from work, then two more. Phoned Catherine late at night when Crews knew she would be at her most vulnerable.

"We can't go on like this, Cath."

"Don't come back yet, Joseph. It's not time. I'm *ill*. You're making it worse. You know that, don't you?" She'd seen the page he kept folded inside his wallet. He'd confided his fears to her the night after Emily had died. Miriam had said he was dangerous; people with his gift had to be isolated.

"Thanks a bunch," he'd said.

"You *know* what I mean, Joseph. Don't be obtuse. There's something wrong. You realise that, surely? Joseph?"

He did. More than she knew. But really *accepting* it meant there'd simply be too much blame to carry on his shoulders.

"See a doctor, Joseph. For me?" Catherine had asked.

But he hadn't. Couldn't. Huge waiting lists just to see a GP these days, and the hospitals were worse. He knew all he needed to know anyway. He'd caused all of this. Miriam had intimated as much.

Realising that made him re-focus. He called work. He had customers. Sales to make. "I'm coming back to work on Monday," he said, and went in search of the bag with his ties in.

The graffiti read: LEON IS DEAD.

Two feet high in aerosol yellow on the side of the bridge as the train crawled into the station. Hard to miss, but it didn't hold Crews's attention for long. Although for a brief moment he wondered who Leon was. Wondered if the message had been intended as a simple fact or as a simple threat.

Leon is Dead.

But then it was gone. Crews was not a man given to flights of imagination. Out of sight, out of mind. People died all of the time, didn't they?

Routine had been what he'd needed. Routine kept the mind focused. Kept the man together. All Crews needed was the suit and the laptop and the anonymous hotel room in an anonymous city. A smile on his face and a sale in his heart. All that bullshit. The fact that his first job was in Birmingham was not lost on him. Not at all.

He let the crowds take him *en masse* up the escalators, into the station, stepping over the homeless teenagers and their mongrels, rotting in corners, and then out into the warm air and sunlight that the city had to offer. Crews checked his planner. Peeled the shirt away from his back, idled for a moment until he felt that familiar jolt of grief, like a jump cable to his chest, then quickly picked up his bags and went in search of a cafe.

come home and tell her the truth. But she didn't. Her face was not wounded nor disconsolate, only *disappointed* somehow. As if she was only sorry that she hadn't got through to him. She left after a cup of tea and some digestives, but not before she'd placed a page torn from what looked like a religious pamphlet into his hand. They hovered on the front porch, reticent of embracing in full view of the neighbours.

"I can't do this anymore," she said. "This will make sense to you eventually I hope." She stared until Crews had to look away. "I *tried*, Joseph."

The page began in the middle of a sentence, and the text remained incomplete on its reverse, but Crews read it afterwards. Then re-read it.

The page began: ' . . . and to accommodate them all equally with my God-given gift.'

It continued: 'My gift then. The Tabula Rasa. Almost no research has been conducted on the subject. What I have gleaned is purely from my own experience since I have yet to make acquaintance with any other soul who shares my ability.

'I believe it flared in me during the onset of adolescence;

much like any other symptom of the hormonal changes one experiences at that period of their life. It came and went in my teenage years, much like acne or sexual urges. It flared and then faded away.

'But it was then that I slowly discovered the effect it had upon others. Often I would find myself the centre of attention for a day or so, sometimes for as long as a week, and then suddenly realise that whatever had initially enticed them had receded somewhere inside me. People would meet me again and be unable to recall why I seemed so appealing to them just days earlier. There was nothing specific that I would say or do, but I had left them with a profound sense of contentment that felt to them like a drug. When it had died down in me, people would only seem disappointed in me.'

'Only now that the Tabula Rasa has become so unmitigated in me, some thirty years later, can I see how people can benefit from my gift.'

He didn't know why but Crews kept the page folded in his wallet. Miriam rang his mobile often, but he didn't return the calls. He went about his life.

simon avery

He found one not five minutes walk out of the city centre. Didn't care much for people these days and subsequently found himself down one empty street or another at odd hours of the day. But this was an area he knew well; had been born no more than five miles away from here, long before world events had thrown everywhere into disarray.

Outside of the centre it was all warehouses and factories and scrap yards, wire fences and the last few remaining Paddy gaffs. Crews saw an army patrol pass by, watched it disappear over Camp Hill and vanish in the heat haze. The best you could hope for, he decided, was a greasy spoon to remind you of your youth. And there, nestling beneath one of the huge arched bridges was such a place.

And above it, spray painted between the pigeons and split stone in six-feet high letters, were the words LEON IS DEAD. And as an addendum, the date: 8/8/2015. No more than a month ago.

Inside the cafe, the heat of the grill had steamed up the windows. Sweat popped up on Crews's forehead. He dabbed at it with his tie, rubbed self-consciously at the stubble of his hair as the cafe's attention wavered upon him before they returned to their breakfasts.

"I wouldn't have married him," one old dear in a head scarf was saying to another. "She could have done better." The other woman agreed wordlessly, a piece of egg yolk spilling from the side of her mouth. Crews ordered a sandwich and a coffee and seated himself beside the window. Placed the bag containing his laptop on the table by the clogged salt and pepper pots.

"I mean he's been in trouble with the *law*." The woman's voice couldn't be ignored, Crews realised. "Well, what sort of example is that to set?" The other woman nodded again, and Crews loosened his tie, glanced out of the window at a couple of old soaks waiting for the boozer on the corner to open its doors. They were sharing a plastic bottle of cider.

The woman in the scarf had no verbal editing system. Crews tried to think himself elsewhere once his sandwich had arrived.

"My daughter, my *eldest*, met a lovely lad. So *quiet*."



Crews closed his eyes. He should have knocked this on the head and turned up for his first appointment early.

"And they're just *smitten* with each other. He even has a job. In this day and age! I told her 'He's a *catch*, that one. You want to bloody well hang onto *that one*.'"

Crews almost interrupted her. Just to shut her up for five minutes. He set his sandwich down. Hands flat on the plastic tablecloth. *Count to ten.*

"They've been courting for, what, seven months now. I said 'It must be serious,' I said. Leon is dead."

Crews opened his eyes. *What?* He looked across at the woman in the scarf but she'd lapsed into the same stony silence as her friend. Their food forgotten. Tea going cold. Crews sat open-mouthed. *What the bloody hell?* Both of them were staring at their feet, or out of the window as if they had suddenly discovered they were lost, bereft. She had *said* that, hadn't she? She had said *Leon is dead*.

Before he could lean over and perhaps tap the woman on the shoulder, both of the old hens were up onto their feet, scraping the chairs back under the table, fastening their coats as they shuffled towards the door. By the time they were venturing out of the shadow of the bridge and into the sunlight, Crews couldn't decide if he'd simply misheard her.

He finished his sandwich and left too.

He arrived for his appointments in the city, made his sales, scheduled further appointments, said his goodbyes. It was a diversion. These people hardly knew him really. He was merely another representative with his catalogues and his laptop, taking their orders, sipping their instant coffee from chipped mugs, smiling effusively at their half-jokes, their little asides, little snipes at the opposition, berating him for his company's prices. He shrugged apologetically, closed up his laptop and went on his way.

Before he returned to the hotel, Crews picked up the local newspaper and flicked through it for any mention of the ubiquitous Leon despite the fact that he'd now be old news. Perhaps he'd been a local celebrity or even a nationwide one who'd simply eluded his net. Crews tried not to listen to the radio or watch the TV. He'd discovered that he could do well without soap operas that mirrored his situation with Catherine; or songs that encouraged his pain or self-pity. But there was nothing in the local rag. If Leon was indeed dead, then he was already chip paper, or no one gave a shit.

Crews lingered for a couple of hours in the hotel bar with the top button of his shirt undone, staring nervously at his G and T. The hotel room would only leave him feeling exposed: the humming air con; the view of ribbons of canals or crumbling factories, or apartments, once luxurious, now fallen into disrepair. He'd have to take the edge off before he could face *that*. It'd only take him five minutes to be reduced to withdrawing photos of Catherine and Emily from his wallet, and he'd been down that particular cul-de-sac one too many times in the past couple of months to find the notion appealing.

Instead, when Crews finally returned to his room, he powered up his laptop and logged onto the Web.

He went in search of Leon. Dubiously typed his name into a search engine. He wished he had more to go on. As he'd expected there was a landslide of results from the search to wade through. In addition he had no idea which road to take from any of the junctions he was faced with.

He threaded his way through web pages for Leons in law practices in San Francisco; Leon's Pizza Parlours; a war correspondent called Leon, currently reporting from some devastated Middle-East country; a Leon who offered photos of 'virgins of 16 and over'; Crews hesitated only once on a news

report of a Leon who'd been held for questioning over the abduction of a schoolgirl in Bristol.

Nothing.

Crews paused, reflected in the last of the evening light as it ebbed away from the room. Just the glow of the laptop screen. He kicked off his shoes and rubbed his neck. Raided the mini-bar. Put the television on and muted it.

Typed 'Leon is Dead' into the search engine.

He hovered over the results: a partial overlapping of the previous ones. Clicked on one or two that led him into dead ends. But nothing new, nothing even remotely connected. So much for being clever, Crews thought. He scrolled back and looked again, spent five minutes clicking on results he'd passed by before. He paused on a site for something called BEATIF.inc. Crews imagined a huge faceless company somewhere in the US. But he was mistaken.

BEATIF.inc – a connection to the light. Join our Birmingham-based congregation and achieve enlightenment. For a small sum, Leon listens and heals. Daily emails, web cam and news. <http://www.beatif.inc.org/Birmingham>

Crews clicked on it but was disappointed. The site had been closed down, the last posting having been some three weeks ago. WATCH THIS SPACE read the only message on the home screen. Deflated, Crews backtracked. Typed BEATIF.inc into the search engine and waited for the results.

He retrieved his mobile phone from his coat pocket, hoping for a text that he might have missed while downstairs in the bar. There was one new message, but he didn't care for it yet. Perhaps he needed another drink from the mini-bar before he could face it. Instead, he scrolled through the old text file and re-read an old one from Catherine: I'LL BE HOME SOON BABY. PUT THE KETTLE ON! XXX. And another: KEN + BARBARA HAVE INVITED US ROUND ON SAT. LET ME KNOW, LUV U.

It felt like vertigo. Like falling into one of those Internet sites that had been left abandoned. Forgotten information. Empty rooms. Crews had the sudden urge to call Catherine. It didn't matter that she'd asked for 'space'; that her mother had confided that Catherine had lost far too much weight, that the hospital couldn't really decide what her affliction was without another round of dispiriting tests, to compare her blood with Emily's.

He called anyway.

"Yes?" An exhausted voice. She knew who it was, despite his concealing the caller ID.

"Catherine." Now that he had her in his ear, he couldn't decide what to say. What *were* the magic words anyway?

"Joseph. We told you not to call." Her voice was flat, without inflection.

"I wanted to hear your voice."

"Joseph . . ."

"I miss you."

"I know."

He waited for her to return the sentiment. But she didn't. Crews could feel the veins hardening in his temples. All he wanted was to lie down beside her, smell her hair on the pillows. All he wanted was for her to be astride him, their thighs moist with sweat as she rose and fell on him, her gaze at once both loving and distant, her fingers tangled in his chest hair. All he wanted was their home in Fulham – *their home* – the furniture and the fireplace, the beds slept in, their daughter returned to the garden with the dog yapping at her heels. All he wanted was this, *returned*.

"I love you."

"I know, Joseph," Catherine said, and turned off her phone.

BEATIF.inc was listed on a site collating the multitude of various religious fringe groups that had sprung up since the start of the century. These days you worshipped on-line. And why not, Crews supposed. These people had been praying in brick buildings and at bedsides to their gods for thousands of years. There really wasn't much difference in his mind.

But where had the *centre* gone for these people? Look in the paper and here was a murder happening in a street near you; turn on the TV and here were atrocities and wars and deadlocks in countries you couldn't find quickly in an atlas. Somehow there was no difference anymore between the church and the shopping parks, with their DIY chains and electrical superstores. People staring at each other across the train carriage and the supermarket queue, wondering how they'd managed to get so fucking lost in themselves while only trying to get away.

Any official links from the BEATIF.inc site had also been closed down. Crews sat back. He'd run out of road finally, and the reality of the fact suddenly closed in on him. When he listened, he could hear lovers in the next room, or perhaps only the sound of them on the television. Music from outside, coming up from the bar below. The sound of traffic thinning out to a dull whisper as the evening grew old.

He'd been putting this off. There was no other option. This had been the only real motive for returning to work, and Birmingham. He retrieved his mobile and looked at the text that Miriam had sent him while he'd been in the bar. She knew the drill by now: JOSEPH. ARE U GOING TO CALL ME OR SHOULD I JUST COME 2 THE HOTEL AS USUAL? I'VE MISSED U. MIRIAM.

He felt hollow, greasy inside. There was a half-formed erection tightening against his underwear. He felt like a sweaty adolescent.

He waited. Two minutes. Three. Five. Fifteen. Then he called her. By the time he did, he could hardly breathe. Miriam, who'd grown up two doors down from Crews. Miriam, whose virginity he'd taken at fourteen, and she his. Miriam, who'd stayed when Crews moved away to London to be with Catherine. Miriam who'd never really moved away from anything. Who'd called him home when he was at this lowest ebb, without calling at all.

He gave her his room number and she told him she was on her way.

They fucked without preamble. Irrespective of the fashion in which their personal lives collided, the simple truth was that Crews made Miriam come like no other man or woman could. Afterwards, they lay apart from each other with a rectangle of moonlight between them, their backs and bellies varnished with sweat, the condom knotted and tossed to the carpet beside Crews's underwear.

Crews explained to Miriam about Catherine. When he was done, she placed a hand on his chest, her watery blue eyes pained. It was as close as he'd seen Miriam get to sympathy. He could still feel the tremors from the lovemaking passing through his body. Like electricity. He wanted to be earthed but felt himself drifting. Talking about Catherine and Emily only made his throat raw with emotion.

"I'm sorry, Joseph. Truly I am."

"When a family loses a child, aren't they supposed to pull together? *Then*, more than ever?"

"People cope in different ways, Joseph."

"I can't seem to get through to her. She blames me."

"She *blames* you?"

"The Tabula Rasa, Miriam. I told her. I had to. If not for you I would never have realised. You knew what was inside me."

There was a moment's silence, and Crews realised that Miri-

am was trying to choose her words.

Finally she said: "This isn't something you cure on the NHS, Joseph. I may have my faults, but I had information passed to me that I believed was in your best interests to have."

Crews drifted. He couldn't find it in him to focus on her words. There were tears welling in his eyes. It had turned Miriam's face into a blur on the periphery of his vision. This was all *so fucked*.

"Do you still have the page I gave you?"

"Yes," Crews said to the darkness. "In my wallet. But I never had any of the symptoms, like it says."

"That man lost his family because of it. Parents, sister, wife. The people I work for identified it in you. I just wanted you away from Catherine and Emily, but I went about it the wrong way. Who'd believe me, standing at your doorstep? I must have sounded like a crazy woman . . ."

Miriam felt too far away from him. Not a rectangle of light's distance away. Crews thought of the only thing remaining in his head that might curb the broken feeling in him, and said it immediately.

"Leon is dead."

Silence. Then, "What?"

"Leon is dead," Crews repeated. "I saw it on a wall, and at the train station. Then I overheard someone saying it. I've been trying to find out who Leon is. *Was*."

"Why is it so important?" Miriam asked after a moment. Her voice sounded hard suddenly. A wall going up. The Miriam of old. There were so many things he could never pin down about this woman whom he'd known from childhood.

"I don't know," he said. "Perhaps it's insignificant. Maybe it's just me, drowning, looking for a distraction."

"Will you meet me again tomorrow, Joseph? Say yes."

"Yes."

"There are things I can tell you now. Things you'll *understand* now."

"Then *tell* me now."

"Tomorrow. Everything will be ready for you tomorrow."

Crews looked at her. She sat up. "If it's any consolation, someone has sprayed *MICHAEL IS GAY* on the bus shelter down the road. I'm not going to lose any sleep over *that*."

Crews felt himself smiling. Earthed. He wanted to be earthed. "I'll bet Michael will," he said.

With some effort, he moved away from the darkness, into the rectangle of moonlight, and then pulled Miriam in after him. He closed his eyes, pictured Catherine in her place.

The dream didn't feel like it belonged to him. In it, he believed he was freed, despite not realising that he had been caged. He had been unplugged, let loose into a world he had forgotten how to know, how to exist in. He felt love, and realised that he was beyond all of that now, but the memory of the purity of it in such diluted times felt like something worth remembering.

Then, here was the sea: the smell of it, the feel of it as it washed around his toes; the sound of seagulls, like old women's laughter in the distance. He was seeing the sky as if it had not been above him since the day he'd been born, then he was feeling rain on his face; sensing a prescient storm, carried to him on the air currents.

And more: an untouched field, the smell of fresh lavender, dandelion seeds, drifting in the warm air; a city, surely long before he'd been born, in a state of restructure, light flaring in its windows, on the cranes moving like slow Goliaths in the sky, birds flooding up into the sun. Crews felt a flare, like the sun moving inside his skin, rising: a moment that stretched -

And then he heard quite clearly: "Leon will rise."

Miriam was gone. Crews rolled over, looked at his watch:

5:36 a.m. He got up. Pulled on his underwear. Went into the bathroom, splashed water on his face. He lingered in the doorway, believing he could still smell the residue of his dream in the air. Perhaps it was only the remnants of Miriam's perfume.

She had unthreaded herself as surely as she ever did. Before and after he had married Catherine, this had been the recurring motif. There was no sentiment to be had in their meetings, despite her needing to see him again. To explain. Finally.

Crews was about to return to bed when he noticed a square of light on the carpet by the door. It was a CD-ROM in a jewel case, evidently pushed under the door. The disc was marked with a black pen. Inevitably, someone had written **LEON IS DEAD**.

Crews sighed. Booted the laptop up again and watched the abandoned streets below him while he waited. Lit a cigarette. He heard the elevators moving through the walls and a segment of his dream registered into his conscious mind. Behind the dreams of flight and sea and sunshine, he'd heard elevators moving. Dandelion seeds, flooding past his face in the scented air, sea between his toes and elevator hydraulics. Crews couldn't

hold onto the thought, or make any real sense of it. He let it go.

When his laptop was ready, he inserted the disc and played the M-PEG file on it, huddled over the screen in the darkness.

Initially he couldn't make a thing out. It was evidently a second or third generation copy videotape before it had been transferred. Slowly Crews began to delineate details between the strips of black and grey, the sudden overexposed flurries of light. It was a film, taken on the hoof. Once the camera settled, he realised what he was seeing, and jerked away from the screen involuntarily.

The body of an old man, naked and stripped, was laid out on an iron bed, sheets soiled, the blanket folded back over the metal framework. Mouth half open, tongue poking stiffly out to one side. White stubble on his pale, mottled face. Limbs atrophied as if by disuse. Knees, wrists and ankles all protruding bone. This was the body of a man who had not left his bed in years.

Before the camera withdrew in a sudden jerky motion, Crews saw a small tray on the table beside the body, and on it, a small bottle, a needle . . . He couldn't be certain: every detail

the body of an old man, naked and bed, sheets soiled, the blanket fo

seemed to be hiding in the grain of poor video. There was a glass partition in the room that Crews couldn't see beyond in the blur, and, pinned above the dead man's head, what appeared to be several crude paintings: gross splashes of colour, like the work of retarded children.

After that the video halted abruptly. Crews sat shivering in the encroaching light of a new day and lit a cigarette. Knew he wouldn't sleep again now. He watched it again.

He had further appointments to keep that morning. More instances in which to frame a smile and work his spiel on the clients. However, he discovered that he couldn't distract himself so well this time around. All he wanted to do was play the film for people, ask them to decipher the fragments that he had, make them into a whole that was more comforting than the one in his mind.

He found himself a bar on New Street, a box of a pub down a staircase where he could hear the trains in the station rumbling through the walls. He washed down his jitters with a pint and a couple of G and Ts. But his hands refused to stop shaking. For egress from his thoughts, he sent a text to Miriam but she didn't reply immediately as he'd assumed she would. He began composing one to Catherine, but he couldn't stop it from sounding like a plea. The confusion in him seemed exposed in every sentence he typed out.

He put the mobile down. Loosened his tie. Worked his way through a cigarette.

When his phone trilled, Crews assumed it was Miriam calling him, but the number was withheld. He picked it up, answered it.

"Joseph," the voice said in his ear. "Go out of the pub, turn right, right again. Go through the arcade and into the lobby of the Rotunda building. Take the lift to the top floor. I'll meet you there." There was a breathlessness to the voice; it wanted to be more authoritative than it was.

"Who's this?" Crews wanted to know.

"Do it, Joseph. Now."

The line went dead. Crews sat for a moment, eyeing the



other patrons with no little suspicion. Clenched his fists. Unclenched them. Made his way out of the bar, and did what he was told.

No one stopped him. Out into the light on New Street, tugging on his coat, right, right again into the narrow arcade. A bundle of rags in a doorway that thrust out its hand for change. Into the lobby. Artificial silence. Carpet on the floors. An unmanned reception desk. Plastic plants. An unpleasant dry heat. Into the waiting elevator, jabbing at the button. Top floor. A lurch. Beer sloshing around, unsettled in his gut. He watched the numbers.

The top floor was all empty office space. Glass frontages. Uncarpeted floors. An abandoned chair. Some unopened mail propped on window ledges. The man at the window had his back to him; he was seeing a less than glorious view. Crews joined him and he half turned.

"McGovern," he said, and shook Crews hand. His salt and pepper hair was creeping away from his crown and forehead, but he was no more than forty. Soft, sad eyes. A shabby suit:

**stripped, was laid out on an iron
bed back over the metal framework**

threadbare at the sleeves, Crews noticed as he took his hand.

"Leon is dead," he said. "He died a month ago. I did it for him because he asked me. I paid off one of the nurses to cast a blind eye."

"Euthanasia," Crews said, remembering the needle. "You sent the video footage."

"Yes."

"Why are you telling me this? Why here?"

"Leon is dead," McGovern said again. "Leon will rise. Who do you think his successor might be, Joseph? If you log on to the BEATIF.inc web site today, you'll find your face staring back at you now. They're up and running again. New offices. It's all in motion, Joseph. You really shouldn't have come back."

McGovern leaned against the window, looked at the empty room. "They left these premises in a hurry only a couple of weeks ago."

"How do you know this?" Crews wanted to know.

"I used to be an employee for BEATIF.inc. But I left several years ago. *Extraneous circumstances*," McGovern said. He spat the words out. "And I paid for it too. Much like you have. But my replacement has been *much* more efficient. I believe you know her quite well."

"Miriam."

"She's been a busy girl. She's been siphoning money from them for the last couple of years while she was looking for her scapegoat to replace Leon when the time came. Now you're here, she's just reeling you in."

"Why is this happening? This is fucking ridiculous."

"Because a man in a high-rise in North Birmingham had what he believed was a beautiful gift, the Tabula Rasa. He built a little parish for himself. They visited his poky little flat, shuffled in one by one for their audience with him, to talk, to confess if they liked, but mainly to feel his gift. Like taking opium. They left with feelings of quietude and bliss that lasted them for a week, sometimes longer, then they came back for more. A little miracle if you were a believer. A palliative for the masses if you were cynical."



"This was all free of charge, of course," McGovern said, rifling through the post on the window ledge, opening the envelopes, letting them flutter to the floor. "Leon was left weakened every time he gave. After a couple of years he only existed to give. He thought it was his life's work. But then BEATIF.inc came in, turned Leon into a business concern. He had no family to speak of, just volunteers who kept the flat tidy, helped keep him washed and fed. BEATIF.inc got rid of them."

"Who are they?"

"Suits. Faceless people. Just another company looking to expand, find new areas of growth. They charged Leon's congregants for their audience with him. And of course they paid willingly. Tiny lives. They were *addicted* to him. Leon was helpless. Bedridden. Eventually they kept him tranquillised.

"Within a year, Leon went worldwide. Believers could log on to his website, receive inspirational emails, view Leon by webcam at selected hours. To most it was just another gimmick, another weeping Virgin Mary, another Lourdes, but to others it was irresistible. Some travelled halfway across the globe to visit him."

McGovern stopped. Placed the mail back on the window ledge. Looked at Crews.

"Why didn't they just come and take me?" Crews asked.

"Too many people who'd miss you; better to let you end up coming to them."

Crews closed his eyes. "No one to miss me now."

"They saw to that," McGovern said. "Not you. Not like you think."

Crews stared at McGovern. Held his eyes. "So we go to their new offices," Crews said. "Have it out with them."

McGovern sighed. Shook his head. "Better if you just go, Joseph. Get out of Birmingham altogether. You only think you have nothing left to lose. But there's so much more to lose if you end up on that bed in that shitty little room."

"No."

"No to what, Joseph?"

"No to leaving. No to her. No to them. Look - " Crews

withdrew the pictures of Catherine and Emily from his wallet. Offered them to McGovern. He flinched. Clearly he was unused to displays of emotion. Or perhaps Crews's story was too similar to his own. "I won't fucking lie down."

There was an awkward moment. Crews put the photos away. McGovern stared at Crews. Held *his* eyes this time. "All right," he said, crouching down to open a briefcase. "I'm glad you said that." He withdrew a sheaf of photos and documents. Smiled. "Shall we discuss our options?"

Crews waited for her to call. He'd packed his bag, gone to the BEATIF.inc website to confirm what McGovern had said was in fact true. It was.

Crews's face, clipped away from a holiday snap. Formerly it had contained Catherine and himself, abroad. Somewhere beautiful: palm trees and the Atlantic in the background. The sun falling like an ember into the water. Catherine had been excised from the picture as simply as she had been from his life.

BOOKINGS NOW BEING TAKEN FOR YOUR AUDIENCE WITH LEON

He had to hold his legs down to stop them from shaking. Thought of Miriam on his doorstep two years ago, asking him to leave Catherine, with eyes like clouded glass. *This instant. Come back to Birmingham with me. It'll be better for you in the long run. Better for all of us.*

Had that been guilt? Had there been some sense of damage control in taking him away from his family by inferring he'd hurt them by staying? He had but not in the way he'd first imagined. He unfolded the page of Leon's writing: BEATIF.inc's little subterfuge: a leak of information that sowed the seeds that would grow into doubt and guilt once Emily then Catherine fell ill.

Miriam was all business when she called. He let her do it her way. "Don't talk, Joseph. Just listen. I want you to write down an address. I need you to meet me immediately."

I know what you fucking need, he thought.

"Let me get a pen," he said.

Ten minutes and he was paid for and out of the doors of the hotel, into a taxi across the street. It had begun to rain. Crews watched the windscreen wipers move from side to side, watched the headlights and the streetlights turn to smears at the edge of his vision.

"Where to?" the driver wanted to know.

Where to? Now there was a question.

Better if you just go, Joseph. Get out of Birmingham altogether, McGovern was still insisting in his head. *You only think you have nothing left to lose.*

But there had been much more to McGovern than met the eye. He'd been busy behind the scene, pulling at a multitude of threads. And it wasn't just what he'd shown Crews either, wasn't just a need for retribution. He wanted to *know*. To know how everyone had managed to get so fucking lost in themselves while only trying to get away. *How* had that happened?

He gave the cab driver the address.

He took Crews to an estate in North Birmingham. Passed an off-license that was barred over, the interior surrounded with plexiglass. Passed a playground with tangled swings, the concrete shimmering with shattered glass. Burnt-out cars. Children in desolate courts; skips piled up with timber, televisions, refuse sacks.

Pulled up at a set of high-rises. Crews paid the man and

made his way down the estate towards a tower block where a crowd of people had gathered. He felt a degree of fatalism about the moment; that he was narrowing his options down voluntarily. But perhaps that was not entirely true. Who was to say that if he fled, they wouldn't find new ways to demolish any new life he cared to create for himself from this moment?

Two children on bikes spotted him first; both ground to a halt and simply stared. Crews kept his head down, however much he knew that the gesture would soon be entirely redundant. The gathering of people were standing in the shadow of the high-rise, staring up at the lit windows or simply looking listless, abandoned. Graffitied over the entrance to the lobby were the words **LEON WILL RISE.**

Then he was amongst them. The mourners were staring at Crews, a slow sense of recognition dawning on their faces. They were stepping aside to allow him through. Whispering in each others' ears, unwilling or incapable of taking their eyes off him.

A middle-aged man in spectacles and a ragged tracksuit patted Crews on the shoulder, confided to him: "They told us you'd be arriving. We wanted to wait." Continued, "Came all the way from Rotherham to see you. You know, *Rotherham.*"

An elderly woman in a beige raincoat pulled tightly beneath her chin smiled warmly at him. "I'm so glad you're here, love. We *all* are."

Crews kept his head down all the way to the entrance, didn't look anyone in the eye. He didn't want to lose his temper at their adoration. But there were more in the lobby. Half of them looked to Crews like they'd just stumbled out of a psychiatric ward: drowsy, heavy-lidded eyes; clothes that suggested everything was in the wash; slippers; sleep-ruffled hair. He felt a wave pass through them *en masse*; a sense of urgency rise in them, like desire. They wanted the *Tabula Rasa*, wanted their fix so they could shuffle back to their homes, anaesthetised. He was aware that the clamour was rising. Someone laid their hands on his shoulders, shuddered theatrically as if they were in a tent in the Deep South, being excised of demons by a charlatan preacher act. Crews shook the hands away, suddenly furious. He stumbled past a seemingly abandoned child in a pushchair. Then its mother, a shabby teenager in a tight T-shirt that clung to her tiny breasts, pushed to the front of the throng to stroke Crews's hair.

"Jesus!" he shouted. Pushed her away. Pressed the **CALL** button for the lift. Heard the echoes of its machinery high above him, and felt something trying to form in his mind. He glanced back at the expectant faces, shuffling and whispering behind him. He imagined that this was the feeling of sudden celebrity: being foisted into the limelight without prior preparation. And perhaps, he thought, these people felt similarly. They had no idea how to act, despite having imagined the moment since hearing of Leon's demise.

When the doors to the elevator opened, Crews stepped inside and pressed the floor number. Turned to see the faces of the crowd gone slack. Eyes like glass. Mouths hanging open as if in the throes of some protracted orgasm. The doors closed. Crews exhaled.

The lights were out on the twelfth floor. There was the smell of stale take-away food and piss rising out of the walls, the carpet: heavy and smothering. Through a partially opened window, Crews could hear voices, either down below or from on the roof. Someone laughing. A child screaming its lungs out.

One of the doors in the corridor was ajar. Crews hesitated on the threshold, trying to prepare himself. He felt a flower of fear, growing inside his belly, rising up through his chest and into his throat until he was certain that there was no

breath left inside him.

But then he heard Miriam say: "Joseph? Joseph, come inside now."

The air inside was musty, like old books, old flesh. The surfaces in the kitchenette that he fumbled past looked slick with grease. Bluebottles dead on the window ledge. Dead plants on the balcony. A clock frozen at ten to two. Several threadbare chairs in the front room that put Crews in mind of the waiting room of a doctors' surgery he would visit with his mother when he was a small boy. A crucifix on the flock wallpaper. Crews couldn't decide what it represented here.

But Miriam was calling him past all of that, into the dark of the bedroom he'd seen before in the video. She was seated behind a glass partition that bisected the room. Ill at ease between a wrought iron bed and some incongruous technology: two PCs, a scanner, a printer, a webcam, a confusion of wires and connections. Crews realised that one side of the room was the viewing area – two plastic chairs, linoleum on the floor, curling up at the edges – and the other, where Miriam sat chain-smoking, was Leon's side. Leon's little cell. The windows has been sealed over.

Crews hovered on the viewing side for a moment while Miriam remained seated beside the bed, exhaling plumes of smoke. An ashtray perched on one thigh. Cigarette stubs curled up in it. She looked changed, Crews thought. Hair dishevelled. Make-up a little bit *off*. Nail varnish chipped like an adolescent's. Miriam had always been the sort of woman who was acutely aware of her appearance. Everything had to be *just so*. But it wasn't just that. Crews had observed her more than once the morning after the night before, not just reapplying make-up or brushing her hair but *considering* herself in the mirror; looking for something perhaps that had gone that she might recapture if she was vigilant enough, patient enough. But now clearly, that need had left her. *I don't give a shit*, her face said. Perhaps it was only guilt, levelling her after all these years.

"I see you told the crowd I'd be arriving," Crews said.

Miriam ignored his remark. Started to speak without so much as looking at him. "I was twenty-three when I first found Leon," she said. "Mother had just died. You had been gone, what, five years by that time. Living your life. I felt abandoned. Leon was on-line; you could see him from a webcam in the room at certain intervals."

"This would be in between the times that he shat himself or they'd be pumping him full of tranquillisers, I take it?"

If she was surprised at what he'd learned in the past day, Miriam didn't let it show. She continued, undeterred: "It didn't seem like much at the time: a skinny man in a little room, staring at the ceiling. It was almost like watching a photograph. But there was something . . . *indefinable*."

"So I visited. Sat where you are now, and just looked at this sad lonely man, like looking at a mermaid in a fish tank at a travelling show, and I only wanted to ask *why*? But then I *felt* it, this beautiful feeling: like the sun had started to rise under my skin. I could feel the *purity* of things suddenly. Here was this awful world around us, with its noise and its clutter, and then there was this man who had given his life and body to the sense of absolute *peace* streaming out of him. It felt like an orgasm that would never subside in me. Like falling in love with a divine being."

"It was what it said on the box: *Tabula Rasa*; a clean slate. One to be taken every month," Crews said bitterly.

Miriam went on, as if all of this had been mulled over. Prepared. "I came back when it wore off. They *all* did. They all still want to. That's why there's so many mourners. The *Tabula Rasa* is in their subconscious. They knew without knowing.

They scrawled it on the walls, their hearts said it before their minds could register: Leon is dead.

"But it's just a palliative. We're all just circling an empty centre. A lost anchor," Miriam said. She took a long pull on her cigarette. Glanced at Crews out of the corner of her eye.

Her final remark had left him wrong footed. A palliative. Empty centres. Lost anchors. There had been regret in her voice. He almost sat down beside her on the bed but decided against it. "So when did they make you a company girl?" he asked. Cold. She more than deserved it.

"Fuck off, Joseph."

Crews sighed. Looked at the narrow bed with its sheets neatly folded at the foot of it; at the paintings still on the wall at the head of it. The smell of faeces when he lingered on it; of ammonia, disinfectant. Someone had died right here. He knew more than she probably realised but he looked at Miriam and said "I'm *listening*" anyway.

She stubbed out her cigarette. Fumbled in the packet for another. There were tremors, starting in her fingers, travelling all the way down to her thigh where the ashtray rested; she was holding herself so tensely that the shakes grew more violent each time she allowed them purchase. Crews was trying to pinpoint where the fear stemmed from. Realised. Waited for her to speak again.

"They hired me after a couple of years. A familiar face. Always around. I redesigned their website; took care of the administrative side of things; all the banking detail from the money that came in from the website and through that door." She pointed with the cigarette between her fingers. Her eyes elsewhere; a place in the past. Crews knew where. Eyes on the money; some for you some for me. A little in the kitty for the rainy day she had planned once her scapegoat arrived.

Crews shook his head. "How could you live with yourself, Miriam? Doing what you do?"

"Leon's act, his initial act was selfless. He wanted to *help* people, Joseph. He truly believed that. Before the company took over people could visit, could talk with him, confess if they wanted to. He was one of them, but he was an *icon* too. An *anchor*."

"He was *anaesthetising* them, Miriam." The company had seen his value; the insidious qualities to the *Tabula Rasa*. "*Political passivity*. They probably don't use that term in the literature, but that's what it is, isn't it?"

Miriam didn't move. Didn't reply.

Crews hadn't finished. "Didn't anyone give a shit that the company had taken over? That Leon had just become a fucking zombie in a bed?"

"Some," Miriam said. "But in the end they'd come for the *Tabula Rasa*."

Crews sat down finally. He felt light headed. The tension had tightened, snapped. It was too much. "Christ," was all he could say for a while. And then, when he thought of it, "But he wanted to die in the end didn't he? He had someone kill him, just to *escape*."

Miriam nodded, clearly seeing some memory of Leon in her mind's eye. "McGovern. They know about him. An ex-employee. He'd come back after hours, paid off one of the nurses. They'll track him down."

"Jesus, Miriam," Crews said. "Listen to yourself. This is ridiculous."

She snorted derisively. "You don't know the half of it."

Crews plucked down the paintings from the wall above Leon's bed for some egress from the maelstrom his head had become. The pictures were childish at best; the product of weak hands and fingers. Had this been the company's little reward at the end of a busy week? Some paper and paint?

Here, as he'd expected, were his previous night's dreamings: clumsy watercolour renderings of the sea and the sky and the gulls that skimmed the steeples of waves; here too was the untouched field bursting with pollen, dandelion seeds floating on the warm air; and perhaps most poignantly of all was the crude orange ball of sun with the Vs of birds flooding towards it. Leon's final gift to the mass consciousness. To the graffiti artists, to the woman in the cafe, to Crews, to them all; they'd all dreamed his final dream, and that above all else felt like something beautiful. Something better than anaesthesia.

"He never once asked me," Miriam said. "Even when we both knew that the Tabula Rasa had gone from him. Never once did he ask me to take him to the sea, or to the country."

"It had gone?" This was something new to Crews.

"Years ago. No one had to know. It was the idea of the Tabula Rasa that worked after a while. It was no more than a placebo. You will be no more than a placebo."

Crews thought of the crowd outside and in the lobby; so eager for Leon's return. Their glassy stares, their mouths open in awe. There was an anger inside him that he couldn't release. All he could do was talk. "How did you have the stomach for it, Miriam? For letting this happen?"

"I tried to get you away from your family, Joseph. Believe that at the very least. I didn't want Catherine and Emily to be harmed. The company did it, not me. Had both of them injected with a virus during a round of inoculations. Devised a way to leave you with the blame with the piece of Leon's story. I knew I could manipulate you, Joseph. Even after Catherine, you always came back to me."

"You had no qualms about leaving me rotting here, like Leon did?"

"I do what I'm told, Joseph."

"Don't they call that political passivity?" Crews tried to smile at Miriam. Had to hold onto the side of the bed. Just as he sensed a spark of agitation in her calm demeanour, he realised

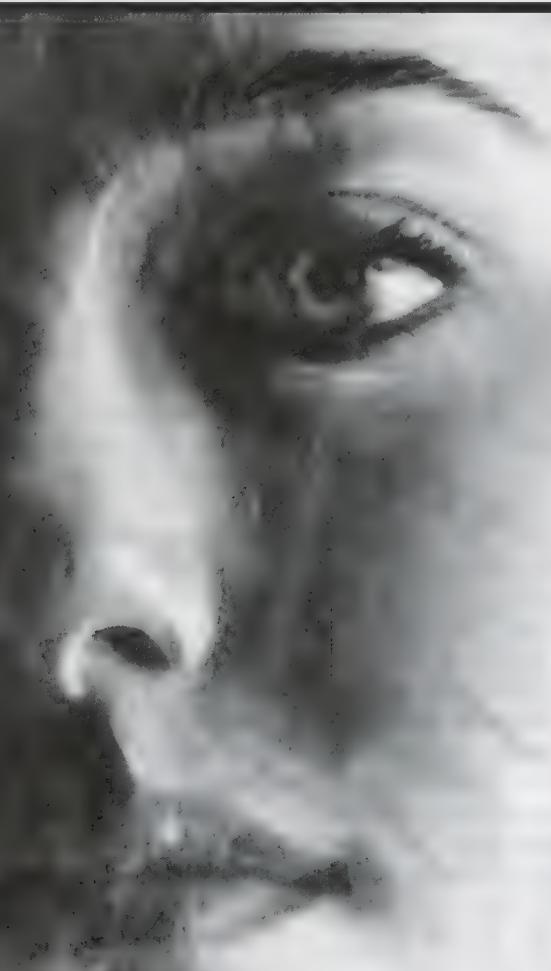
what was happening. Too late; something gave way deep inside of him; he lost his grip on the side of the bed; tried to focus on the cigarette in her mouth, the fire burning and smouldering, burning and smouldering. When it lit her face, he could see how empty her eyes were, how cold. He felt as if he were being unstitched from the inside. He'd realised too late: it wasn't just the money she was getting away with, it was a secret too. The big one. The one thing that McGovern had managed to miss. He remembered the lines in the fragment of Leon's life he'd carried around with him all this time: *Often I would find myself the centre of attention for a day or so... people would meet me again and be unable to recall why I seemed so special to them.*

It had been the Tabula Rasa that had kept him coming back to Miriam all these years, without ever really knowing why when there was no real bond other than childhood between them.

"It wasn't hard keeping a distance," Miriam was saying as he tried to crawl away. She'd realised that he'd figured it out. He was fumbling in his coat for his phone. "Never really saw anyone from the company, so they never knew that they had another Leon right under their noses. When I asked if I could leave they said I could walk as long as I delivered a replacement. I knew where to look. The one man who'd left me behind. You were always so susceptible to me, even before I discovered my gift; you actually swallowed all that shit about the Tabula Rasa infecting your family..."

Crews stopped crawling. All he could think was how he could lie here and the warmth would surely protect him. Like lying in sunlight. Like *being* sunlight. But still, something was itching in the back of his skull, something that, if he allowed it purchase, might flutter, burst from him, be more than the wonderful *stillness* in him.

His phone slid out of his coat pocket, and so too did his wallet. The wallet with the pictures of Catherine and Emily.



Five Months Later

Six a.m. He is up before the tourists every morning. Goes down to the beach and stands with his shoes in his hand, feels the sea between his toes. Watches the sun rise.

He buys fresh bread from a cart every day, and then returns to the hotel. Swims for half an hour in the pool and sits in a sun chair alone, watching the shadows stretch across the courtyards and balconies. By nine the air will be hot and fragrant. The slightest of breezes coming off the ocean.

Catherine is awake when Crews returns to their room. She is lying in bed in nothing but her underwear, reading yesterday's paper from Britain. One of the tabloids. Crews thinks she looks much as she did when he first met her. It gives him butterflies in his belly. Everything is like that now. Like courting again. Like starting anew, but with the memories making silences where there should only be enquiry.

"You missed breakfast," she says, indicating the empty plate and the untouched one on a tray beside the bed.

He kisses her, feels a pang of love rush through his body like sunlight rising in him. Tries not to let her see. He doesn't know how to act around her, so soon after she has been returned from the clinic in Florida. Because of McGovern, the company had paid for her to be flown there, for some proce-

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He had to pick up the phone. He could hear someone inside his skull saying *There's so much more to lose if you end up on that bed in that shitty little room*. And then another one, more familiar, saying *I won't fucking lie down*.

He said it aloud to Miriam but she seemed far away. She had a phone of her own. She waited. Let the ash fall from her cigarette. She didn't give a shit, he thought, vaguely. She was talking to BEATIF.inc.

Crews tried to lift himself, but Miriam's *Tabula Rasa* was taking a hold of him now; he could feel his thoughts becoming threads, dissipating like cigarette smoke. Miriam was done on the phone. She got down on one knee to speak in Crews's ear.

"All done," she said. "I delivered them their Leon and now I can walk away. What do you think about *that*, Joseph?"

But then she stopped. Something had taken her attention away from Crews. She looked up towards the bedroom door. Her face slowly wrinkled in anger. Crews craned his neck but still couldn't see. Rolled over onto his back. Exhaled what felt like his last breath. Relief probably, somewhere deep down.

Saw McGovern in the doorway in his shabby suit. There were several other figures in suits behind him. BEATIF.inc. Crews smiled to himself, but couldn't remember why the sight pleased him so.

"Miriam," McGovern said. "These gentlemen would like a word with you."

dure that he could neither pronounce nor fully understand. Two weeks of pale-grey corridors and the rains from the Gulf Stream shattering the clinics carefully ordered calm. He'd had to leave prematurely before it had broken something in him. Catherine would call him every night before she went to sleep. Her voice, fraught and exhausted, would only make him weep afterwards. For her, for himself; both of them resigned to walking on eggshells.

She is only thinner, more fragile than before. There are mine fields to navigate but it is a beginning. They talked about Emily over dinner the night that she arrived, and then again the following morning. They try to remember something about her every day now. It feels like the right thing to do but they can't be certain. There seem to be no hard and fast rules to grief.

The tabloids have finally stopped talking about Leon, about BEATIF.inc. In lieu of McGovern having sufficient evidence amassed for a conviction, he had instead made damn sure that he had a story that the press wanted to hear more and more of. Audio and video tapes made of Leon after hours; names, places, dates; and more: bank statements and discrepancies that had more than exposed Miriam with her hand in the pot. The story had ran; so too did Miriam and the company. The tabloids had tracked them down. At least there had been some



reparation for Leon's life and for McGovern's family.

And for Emily. McGovern was more of a bastard than he looked. Hadn't let the company loose until he'd at least blackmailed certain silent investors in BEATIF.inc who wanted only to remain anonymous. High profile. Even Crews recognised one of the names. They'd been more than happy to dig deep in their pockets. McGovern still keeps in touch; a call every week or so, to keep Crews apprised of new developments.

Sometimes Crews only tells McGovern to stop. "Smell the flowers," he says, realising how absurd he sounds. But this is important. Leon has changed him in all sorts of subtle ways.

He suddenly wants to tell Catherine how much he loves her, wants her to know about Miriam so there can be a fresh start, or at least a clean ending with no recriminations. Instead he holds his tongue and goes to the window, opens the drapes, looks at the view: palm trees, their fronds swaying in the heated breeze; the sunlight flashing on the waves on the Atlantic. The smell of seafood in the air. Birds like Vs flying into the sun. He is still dreaming Leon's dream every night. It is like holding onto mercury, but it feels like the start of something.

Crews looks back at Catherine. He begins to speak, then waits. She smiles at him in a soft, lazy manner that he remembers all too well. He smiles back. There is plenty of time.



F L E S H I N G S N C T U A R

Okay, the tape says. *This was recorded on October fifteenth, nineteen eighty-one.* Yesterday, Sandy knows. *The first, uh, first thing you have to do is set your watch alarm up thirty minutes so you remember to listen again.*

He follows the instructions, steadying the wheel with his elbows as he sets his wristwatch to beep at 5:30 a.m.

You have to keep listening because you're outside of Sanctuary. Everything outside of Sanctuary forgets everything inside, forever. You should have some time before it hits you, but who knows how much, so hurry up.

A piano clangs in his ear. It's 'Fur Elise'. Bobby played it for him last night on Sanctuary's only piano, an old upright in the commons. Underneath the music, the piano's levers and hammers creak. No one in Sanctuary knows how to maintain it, least of all Sandy. Kath was the musical one in Sandy's family. She led the choir three nights a week and had a wall full of LPs. Her last birthday gift from him had been an expensive German turntable. She'd been thrilled.

The playing stops. *Can I go now?* Bobby asks. Hearing his son's voice, Sandy glances at the shiny Polaroid that's taped to the dashboard. It's a pre-Sanctuary shot of Bobby, one that Kath snapped for her sister, for Bobby's overseas auntie. He's posed on the cement steps of their old house. Bobby's grown a lot in the two years since the photo was taken, but his features are exactly the same; he's slender, fair-skinned and ash-blond, a little-boy version of Kath. Aside from his brown eyes, Bobby got very little from his dad.

Don't worry about Bobby. He's safe, he's with Frank Gibbs. Frank is a good guy . . . he played pro football until he missed a big field goal and got run out of Philadelphia. Bobby's football almanac has never heard of him, by the way.

Then, a pause.

You have to get Bobby out of Sanctuary and find something on the outside for him. It's not fair when an eight-year-old kid can teach himself the piano and then not have anyone to play for.

Kath would have been so thrilled to hear Bobby play. She would've bought him lessons, gone to recitals, sent him to Juilliard . . .

You have to check if Witherspoon still remembers you. Then you have to go to Bev's place. His voice cracks up a bit. And . . . And get Kath's ashes.

The tape matches up exactly with what Sandy remembers of his plan. His brain does not appear to have been addled by the passage over Sanctuary's threshold, which is kind of a pity, because part of him is tempted to just forget about the plan and drive away into whatever fuzzy world Taylor will make for him.

But he knows he can't do that, not if he wants to get Bobby out of Sanctuary. In fact, yesterday he'd asked Taylor to take it easy on him, in a kind of joking-but-serious tone, but Taylor just shook his head. It wasn't that he couldn't do it, Sandy figured; if the grocery trucks that rolled in every week were any indication, Taylor had pretty fine control over what out-

Thankfully for Sandy, the goodbye is brief. He doesn't have to bring much along on his excursion, no luggage or shaving kit or anything like that, so as soon as he's got his nerve up, he can bid his adieus and jump in his wood-panelled wagon and go.

"I can't say thanks enough," he says to Frank, his voice shaky.

"Oh, no trouble," Frank says in his slow Mississippi drawl. "We'll be fine, right, sport?" He's standing behind Bobby. His hands, each big enough to engulf a football, rest on Bobby's shoulders. Sandy has often marvelled at the size and deftness of those hands; they make his own look so puny.

Bobby rubs his eyes sleepily. He and Frank were outside all day yesterday, and his face is a little sunburnt. Bobby sunburns really easily, just like his mom did.

Frank pushes him at Sandy. "Go say goodbye to your daddy," he says. Sandy kneels and takes Bobby into a tight hug, which is casually returned.

"I'll be back soon, kiddo."

"Um-hum," murmurs Bobby.

Sandy almost says *I love you, you know* but at the last second, he bites the words off and just lets go. The boy ambles back to Frank.

Sandy gets in the wagon and turns the key. The engine cranks for a few seconds before it catches, but once it does, it idles smoothly. This is a relief to Sandy. He wasn't sure how the car would run. He's only started it once in the past year.

"Godspeed," Frank says, through the window.

Sandy nods. Without looking at Frank or his son, he backs out of his driveway and creeps down Sanctuary's smoothly-paved central boulevard.

It's not quite dawn yet. The only person he sees outside is Mr Diebau, who's watering his gardenias under the porch lights of his barn-style bungalow. The old man of Sanctuary at 76, Diebau found himself on a Jewish hit list in 1947 and

was shot at three times before Taylor took him in. He claims he was working in Stockholm during the war, far away from Treblinka, which another Diebau had some hand in running.

Next to Diebau lives Sanctuary's most eligible woman, the still-pretty Allison Jenks. Allison will freely admit the self-defense stabbing of her speed-addict husband to anyone who's curious. This frank black widow shtick hasn't dissuaded the wooing Sanctuary menfolk in the slightest, though Sandy has stayed away. Sandy has acknowledged that he probably has little to offer her.

He passes a dozen more houses – each with its own story of quasi-innocence or justifiable guilt – then he's passing Taylor's. Sanctuary's head honcho is out and about too, sitting on his front porch with a coffee mug in his hand. It's not strange to see Taylor up at odd hours. Sandy's not sure if he even needs to sleep. In fact, there's very little about Taylor that Sandy is sure of – most prominently, how he does what he does with Sanctuary.

They wave at each other casually, like two farmers on a country road.

Now he's almost out. Sanctuary doesn't have a big iron gate or walls topped with broken glass or anything heavy like that. There's just the line where the pavement ends and the gravel begins, and that's all that's needed.

Sandy rolls up to that line, stops, and puts the car in park. He grabs the bulbous plastic earphone of his cassette recorder from the passenger seat and pushes it into his ear. It doesn't fit right; it's too big and his ear is already tender from it, but it was the best tape deck he could trade for. It was lucky for him that Al Simms the bribe-taking Tallahassee DA had it on hand.

(Simms used those bribes to send his daughter to a cancer clinic in Geneva. He was indicted two days before she died.)

Sandy presses PLAY. When he hears his own voice, he hits the gas.



siders knew about Sanctuary. But he wouldn't make exceptions for tenants. He had his rules, and he stuck to them. He knew exactly how much effort he'd expend on your behalf, and if you were more trouble than that – if you went back out into the world and made too many waves – then he'd dump you like a crippled baby bird. He said as much when he invited Sandy to Sanctuary. You can leave anytime, but no one gets special treatment. No one. Out here, Sandy's on his own.

By 5:40 – just after his second tape-listen finishes – Sandy clears the gravel road and turns onto the highway. His first stop is Sharkey's Seafood, about two hundred and twenty miles away. He locks his cruise control just slightly over the 50mph speed limit and settles in for the ride.

Once the monotony of the road sets in, Sandy has a yawning attack. He didn't sleep very well last night. His head was too full of scenarios, like what if his station wagon breaks down or what if he gets pulled over for expired tabs and the troopers call in his name and finds he's disappeared? What if Witherspoon – a man whose mind was akin to a scrapyard electromagnet – has resisted Taylor's wipe job?

Then this thing will be a whole lot simpler, he answers himself. The miles roll by.

It's just before noon when he reaches the city. He parks three blocks away from Sharkey's and goes in on foot. The tape recorder is in the left pocket of his windbreaker. It makes a conspicuous, gun-like bulge. He should've worn something

bulkier, maybe his ski parka; he hardly fills that out, there'd be plenty of room inside it . . .

The Sharkey's building is still there, the single-story place with whitewashed wooden siding, nestled between a builders' supply store and a body shop. It's not called Sharkey's Seafood anymore, although Sandy can see where that was painted out. Now it's The Pier.

Sandy gets nervous, and tells himself that it's still seafood, it's still Witherspoon's, probably.

There's an old park across the street, a junkie hangout. Sandy settles himself on a bench and takes up vigil. A heavily bundled man approaches and asks him for a light. Kath always got into conversations with those kinds of people. She'd talk to anyone, want to know how they were doing, what they thought of the weather.

Sandy shakes his head and the derelict goes away.

Everything is crisp and clear and acute, like the chilly metal rails of the bench, unwarmed by his skinny ass, pressing through his jeans, like the bright rusty bullseyes surrounding the bolts on the corrugated tin walls of the body shop, like the soundless flicks of his digital watch as it counts towards Witherspoon's lunchtime.

The watch reminds him of the tape. He's just two minutes off another scheduled listen, so he jams the earphone in his left ear – his right needs a break – and listens to 'Fur Elise' again. But then he realizes how stupid and conspicuous he must look with that thing in his ear, so he stops the tape and

stows the earphone and just sits quietly, thinking.

Sandy has dreamed about this encounter ever since he went to Sanctuary. It's always the same scene; him and Witherspoon sitting down and calmly talking over shark fillets and vermouth.

Witherspoon doesn't apologize for Kath's death. The only thing he'll say is that it wasn't about the money, and that the matter's settled. Sandy nods and promises never to steal from him again. Then they shake hands.

Sandy usually wakes up then, hating himself hard, because a good chunk of him pines for that scenario. Life was good during the Witherspoon days. All he had to do was sit in the back of Sharkey's and shuffle money between new restaurants, old restaurants, holding companies, offshore banks, and insurance policies. It was a high-overhead process and its accounting was kept necessarily vague, so Sandy had felt fine about steering a bit of that overhead into his own pocket.

Of all the crime bosses in the world, Witherspoon was a horrendous choice to steal from, because his nose and brain were exquisitely tuned to cashflow. No matter where in the world he was, no matter what else was going on, he expected a daily verbal report from Sandy. He wanted to know exactly how much money each of his people was bringing into the organisation. He never made notes, but that didn't seem to hamper him; he still managed to coalesce massive reams of time-sensitive accounting data into projections and trends and solid managerial information.

Sandy was impressed by this, but not enough.

Looking back, he can't tell when Witherspoon found him out. All he knows is that one Saturday in April – a day when he and Bobby took Kath's truck and went out shopping for a new refrigerator – Witherspoon's thugs kicked in his side door and staged what the detectives gruffly called a room-to-room housecleaning. They shot the dog and the fish tank and the TV and Kath. The police found her lying in her closet with her terrycloth robe wrapped tightly around the gaping wounds in her sternum and stomach. They found no other bloodstains. She was shot in the closet, probably hiding there, the cops surmised.

Everything moved quickly then: the back of the cruiser, the station house, the interrogations where he was too terrified to do anything but twitch and sob and generally infuriate the detectives, and the cheap cockroach-infested motel they put Bobby and him in. Taylor, showing up unannounced, drifting past the beat cops standing guard, waking him in the middle of the night with an insane offer. Him grabbing Bobby, fleeing, emptying two of Witherspoon's overseas accounts into Taylor's.

Then came the year of unwashed and unshaven paralysis, interrupted only by the realization that Bobby was never around anymore. That night, he went into the garage, got into the wagon, and turned the key. But he lost his nerve. *Not fair*, he told himself. Kath had died terrified, and here he was sitting on a comfortable vinyl bench seat, waiting to just drift away. When was that? January? February? He couldn't remember exactly when.

The only day he can remember exactly was the afternoon three weeks ago, when he woke up and realized that if he was careful and did things right, he could win a fresh start for himself and for Bobby too.

Witherspoon arrives.

Sandy sees him, dapper and massive, huffing alone down the sidewalk and into the Pier. It's almost twelve-thirty, which is lunchtime by Witherspoon's hyper-regular scheduling. He doesn't linger in the restaurant's seating area. He disappears into the back, towards his office.

Sandy doesn't move right away. He forces himself to wait

ten minutes before he moves. He wants Witherspoon settled.

He crosses the street and goes inside, walking quickly but not urgently, trying to remember how he moved when he had the easy run of this place. The Pier is almost empty. Only one table has customers at it. They're white guys in painter's caps and overalls, not Witherspoon's people.

Head down, he enters the back hallway and passes his old office, which was once the ladies' room. When he told Witherspoon he needed somewhere to work, Witherspoon changed the men's to unisex and gave the ladies' to Sandy.

He's at the office door. His hand, acting almost independently, is on its centre, pushing –

The door creaks inward. Behind it, his old boss is at his desk, jacket off, a paper napkin tucked into the collar of his navy blue shirt. A styrofoam takeout container, overflowing with something glistening, sits before him.

Sandy leans forward, trying to get a good look at Witherspoon's face. Witherspoon's eyes, stark and white against his enormous Jamaican face, snap upwards at Sandy. His hands dart beneath his napkin, knocking his silverware to the floor.

The air in Sandy's lungs solidifies. His eyes squeeze shut. Any moment now, Witherspoon's bullets will smash into him, just like Kath. *It'll be a relief, really*, he thinks. *Witherspoon is a good shot, he won't muff it and just wound me –*

No bullets come. He opens his eyes. There's no gun. Witherspoon is now sporting a pair of bifocals. And the eyes behind those lenses, Sandy sees, are completely untroubled by recognition.

He takes a step inward and looks closer, because he didn't come all this way to not be absolutely sure. And there is something in those eyes, not recollection, no, but a spark of – what? Puzzled, Sandy squints through the glare of Witherspoon's lenses.

He sees pity.

Witherspoon is being magnanimous. Because this poor anonymous man, this utterly unformidable wild-eyed little wheezer obviously doesn't know who he's crossed. So he'll be gentle. "The restroom is up the hall," Witherspoon says in his gurgly Caribbean voice.

"Um, sorry," Sandy says. "Thanks."

Witherspoon waves at him backhandedly. Sandy's dismissed.

He closes the door behind himself and leaves through the front.

As soon as Sandy gets back to his car, he grabs his tape recorder and cues up 'Fur Elise'.

He tears the Polaroid off the dashboard. It flutters in his trembling grip. He steadies his hand against the steering wheel and stares at it until he feels like he's memorized every grain.

"That was the easy part, kid," he whispers.

He thinks about how Bobby's eyes have changed since Kath's death, how they started out accusing and have moved on to cold indifference. And not without good reason, he knows, because what does Bobby have to look forward to?

When 'Fur Elise' concludes, he flips the REWIND lever and plays Bobby's recital again.

"It's all for you, Bobby. It's all for you." And he means it, because since the day that Kath died, everything has been about Bobby. Sandy sees it like this: every tenant in Sanctuary was a genuine victim of conscience or circumstances, whereas he could claim to be victimized by nothing but his own stupidity. So why had Taylor taken him in? Because Bobby was the true victim, Sandy figures. Sandy was merely an agent for him, someone who could consent to Sanctuary on his behalf and see to his basic needs, perhaps until someone more satisfactory – Frank, for instance – could step in.

Yes, everything's about Bobby. When he tells himself that, things become easier.

He starts the wagon and heads for the suburbs, towards Kath's parents' place.

It's a few minutes before two when he arrives at Bev's house. His mother-in-law's Chrysler is home, so he prowls the neighborhood, driving past every fifteen minutes or so, listening to his tape, praying she'll leave. To kill time between trips, he finds a payphone and checks up some more on Taylor's work. He calls in a couple phoney validations on his Visa card; both of them come back declined. Hannah, the loan officer from First National, can't find any record of him or his mortgage on the white Juniper Road A-frame. And a long-distance call to Credit Suisse in Zurich, one that costs him an entire roll of quarters, confirms that his account there is gone too. Even the Swiss have forgotten him.

But Bev won't co-operate. She stays put. Evening comes, and the suburban roads crowd with traffic returning from the city. Sandy's stomach growls. He grabs a Big Mac from a nearby McDonald's. His mother-in-law eats supper at six-thirty. He can see her through the kitchen window. When it gets dark, flickery lights shine from behind the living room curtains. Sandy fumes. Did she have to watch the goddamn TV? Couldn't she go somewhere? Kath always railed about how much television her mom watched, especially after her dad died. Mom ought to be out doing something, she'd say.

At nine o'clock, he notices that his tape is starting to sound a little muddy.

Are his batteries going dead? He races out to the main drag, finds a Texaco, and exchanges the recorder's six AA-cells for fresh ones. They don't help. Maybe the new ones have gone dead on the shelf? He goes back inside and buys every battery the station has. Back in the car, he jams them into the recorder in a bunch of different combinations, but the playback is still warbly.

Taylor's starting on him.

Heart hammering, he speeds back to his in-laws' house. And thank God, it's finally dark inside. He should wait. She'll still be awake, or only newly asleep. She'll call the police —

Sandy decides to go in anyway. He gets out of his car, closes the door softly, and creeps to the back door, hoping they haven't changed the locks. They haven't. His key clicks and turns smoothly. He eases the door open and steps across the threshold.

He isn't even fully in the house before Bev's terrier Button detonates. Claws scraping tile, she races into the kitchen. Her piercing yips threaten to pop his resolve like a weather balloon, but after a couple of seconds, he manages to steel himself to her racket and continue onward, towards the living room.

There are two urns on the mantle. One of them, the one carved from some kind of flecked stone, he's seen before. It's Martin's. The other, the new one, is gold-gilded glass. Sandy takes it off the mantle, cradling it in both his hands. It occurs to him that even if it didn't contain the ashes of his wife, this piece would suggest her, her blonde hair, her effortless, understated elegance. Bev did a good job picking it out.

Button's barking jumps an octave. Sandy hardly notices.

Kath's urn is surrounded by happy pictures: graduations, ski trips, a high-school curtain call as Annie Oakley. Of course, Sandy appears nowhere, having been excised from them as perfectly as he was from Witherspoon's memory. He stares at the shrine, wondering what kind of life Bev remembers for her daughter. Taylor once said that people are good about helping him do his work; pushed correctly, the human subconscious will eagerly discard ugly truths and replaced them with happy

fictions. The main challenge is keeping it all in sync.

Happy fictions. Sandy thinks about those words for a second, and then a single thought closes over him like the ocean: *She would have been far better off if those pictures were the whole truth instead of just Taylor's truth.*

"What are you doing?"

He turns around. He's woken Bev up. She's standing behind him, wearing a pink bathrobe and slippers.

"You put her down," Bev says, in the same voice she used to use on Bobby when he misbehaved.

She reaches for the urn. "W-wait —" Sandy says. He tries to jerk it away, but it's smooth and glossy and slips from his sweaty hands, bouncing off an endtable and to the floor. It winds up next to his foot, with a small circle of ash spilled underneath its broken neck.

Bev shrieks and runs from the room. Sandy hears her heading down into the basement. He kneels by the endtable and tries to pinch the spilled ash back into the intact body of the urn. He's not very successful. Most of it is trapped within the thick fibers of the living room carpet and is mixed with glass fragments to boot. He won't be able to get it out without a vacuum cleaner.

"That's my little girl," Bev says. Sandy glances up. She's standing in the kitchen doorway. There's a gun in her hands — Martin's old Air Force pistol. Her tiny hands make it look even more huge.

Sandy stands up, the urn tucked in his elbow like a football.

"You can't take her," Bev says. "You can have anything else, but not her."

Sandy stares at his mother-in-law. He could let her shoot him, he thinks. He could let her do what he didn't have the courage to do, back in his garage in Sanctuary, what he'd maybe hoped for from Witherspoon —

"I'm warning you," she says, raising the gun. "I've called the police."

— or he could stand here and get arrested and get thrown in jail for as long as it took them to straighten out his identity. No, that's not going to happen. Not when he's this close to winning. Kath's death was a mistake, a goddamn stupid mistake. He's paid for it every minute of every day ever since. How long until he's done? How long until he gets out from under her? Forever, if he doesn't take Kath's urn and drive it back to Sanctuary right now.

He holds it out in front of his body and walks towards Bev. It's a poor shield, but maybe it'll make her think twice before shooting.

"Stay away from me!"

"I won't hurt you," he says.

Eyes closed, she lowers the gun towards his legs. He dives behind the couch, carefully cradling the urn, as a tremendous *flashbang* explodes in the room. His leg burns, and suddenly the Big Mac he had for supper wants to come right back up. *Oh my god I've been shot I've been shot —*

The nausea passes. He pulls himself together and touches the wound. There's a bloody line cut into the thigh of his jeans. She only grazed him.

He hears a metallic clatter and risks a peek around the couch. She's dropped the gun and is wringing her hand. *Arthritis*, he remembers. *And osteoporosis.*

He stands up. His leg still seems to work. He limps past her, into the kitchen.

"Why?" she sobs at him.

"I have to," Sandy says. "I'm sorry."

He hobbles out the door and jumps in his car. Key-gearshift-gas and he's gone.

In the rear-view mirror, he sees Bev standing on her porch.

"I'm sorry," he shouts, pounding the steering wheel as he soars through a stop sign. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." It's the exact same apology he whispers to himself every time he thinks of his in-laws. It makes him think of all those cheap homilies at his and Kath's wedding, how Martin had drunkenly gone on about gaining a son instead of losing a daughter.

The fact that Bev's hurt will be temporary is no comfort. Tears come. The road turns blurry, but Sandy keeps driving.

He doesn't stop to take care of his leg. He drives four hours straight on the freeway, his speed slowly edging up until the wagon's going as fast as it can.

The tape is not just garbled now, but is also beginning to fade. He listens to it for every mile of the freeway, filling in the dead and incomprehensible spots with his own memory.

At the right exit, he turns off towards Sanctuary. He drew a map for this part. When he retrieves it from his breast pocket and unfolds it, he sees that it's blank.

"Taylor, you bastard," he whispers.

He flips on the dome light. The Polaroid of Bobby is intact. Is it faded a bit? He can't tell. It wasn't very bright to begin with . . .

He tries to be calm and think rationally. On the way out, he'd taken about an hour to get to the highway. But of course, that was in the morning light, and he was driving faster.

He keeps going. Sanctuary is deep in the sticks. The roads leading to it are thick with forks and unmarked intersections. He follows his best recollections, but he could be going in circles, for all he knows.

His gas gauge, he notices at one point, is a hair under an eighth full. Twenty minutes later, the wagon's engine sputters, its lights dim, and it coasts to a halt.

Sandy grabs Kath's urn and gets out of the car. The road is faintly visible under the Milky Way. He starts down it. Neither his asthma nor his cheap shoes are happy with this exercise. When he reaches the top of a long hill, he has to sit and take a slug from his inhaler.

It feels good to sit down, so good that he reclines back on the road. He never dreamed that gravel could feel soft.

It's over now, he knows.

Taylor, he says to himself, almost like he's praying, I'm sorry if I made you work harder than you like. Please help Frank take care of Bobby. Tell Bobby I left because I wanted to help but that I guess it's pretty clear that he's better off without me now.

He leans forward and sits up for one final look around, one final moment before he surrenders to his fatigue and lets Taylor scrub his brain.

There's lights ahead. A faint glow in the sky, like a faraway city. Lights he wouldn't notice if his headlights were on.

Maybe he's found his way on his own, or maybe his words have opened a shutter in Taylor's hard heart. But he doesn't care either way; he just starts shuffling towards the light.

Sandy staggers into Sanctuary.

Frank lives about two hundred yards up the main boulevard. For this final stretch of his journey, Sandy kicks off his shoes and walks on the grass. Sanctuary is rich with well-manicured lawns. Sandy's sore feet are grateful for them.

All of the lights are off at Frank's house, but Sandy pounds on the door anyway. A minute later, Frank answers in a bathrobe. Bobby's there too, holding Frank's hand.

"Holy cow!" Frank says as he turns on the porch light. "What happened to your leg?"

Sandy shakes his head. "I'm all right." He puts down the urn and grabs Bobby and lifts him into a great big hug. Bobby is heavier than he remembers.

"I did it. I'm home, kiddo, I'm home," he whispers into his

squirming son's ear.

"Huh? Mr Taylor?" Frank says. When Sandy glances up, he sees Taylor standing on Frank's lawn.

"Can you take Bobby inside, Frank?" Sandy asks. Frank, stalwart as ever, takes Bobby in his arms and disappears into the house.

When they're gone, Sandy picks up the urn. In the bright lights of Frank's porch, he sees that his bloody fingerprints are smudged all over it. He tries to polish it with his coat sleeve, but succeeds only in smearing the mess.

"If you want to clean it, I can take her tomorrow," Taylor says.

"No." Sandy shakes his head. "Might as well get it over with."

Taylor nods, and Sandy passes him the urn. He accepts it without comment, his face characteristically blank of judgment.

"Please take good care of her," Sandy says.

Taylor nods again and silently walks away.

A few days later, Sandy scrounges some gas, throws a few things in the back of the wagon, puts a garbage bag over the bloodstained driver's seat, and heads south with Bobby.

They go slowly, sleeping in campgrounds and motels. At first Sandy tries to think of a plan: where to go, how to reappear? He's got some time to figure it out. There's enough money to go for awhile, so he puts that off and thinks about more important things. Like Bobby, who has been supernaturally quiet since Frank and he said goodbye.

Sometimes Sandy asks Bobby what he's thinking. Bobby denies thinking anything.

Sandy knows Taylor's working on Bobby. Sandy can feel Taylor working on himself. Sometimes, he'll be thinking about Kath, thinking about something deeply tactile and satisfying – like the freckles on her back or the waves in her hair or the game of peekaboo they'd played on the bus when they were both too shy to talk – and then his mind will click softly like an old ratchet and it'll be gone.

It doesn't hurt too much. Taylor is smooth.

One night in a motel room in Arizona, with Bobby snoring in a cot, Sandy gets out all of his memorabilia. Photographs, marriage license, death certificate. The old checkbook. He looks at it all, then puts it in a paper bag and goes outside and puts that paper bag in the garbage bin behind the motel.

When he goes back inside, Bobby shivers at the draft from the open door, but he doesn't wake up.

Sandy falls asleep quickly. During the night, his subconscious starts in on his story, on the lies that will explain Bobby and the missing year and a half of his life and also his non-working Visa card and the expired license tabs on his wagon. It's a tall order, one that'll take more than a single night to get stapled together.

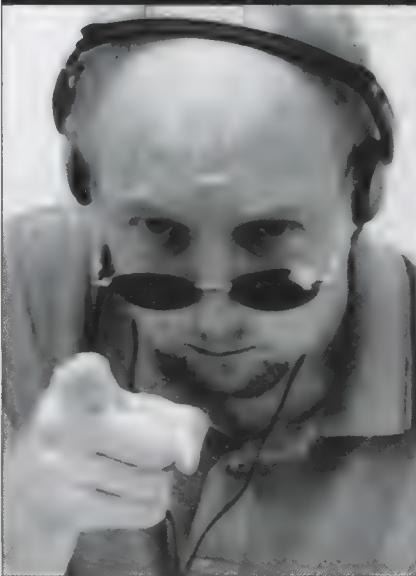
When he wakes up the next morning, his past is as hazy as his future, and his present is soured by a narrow scrap of feeling that's ground into him like he's a deep-pile carpet, something that's faraway but still sharp enough to cut him if he brushes up against it.

After a breakfast of chocolate bars and skim milk, he and Bobby get in the wagon and take to the road. The driving helps. Sandy's feelings mirror the yellow stitches on the blacktop; they blur into a fuzzy, unbroken line, stretching from the motel parking lot to somewhere better, to a place where he will have no apologies outstanding.

Now he just needs to make it there.

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ALLEN ASHLEY



What are your Desert Island Discs?

What are the very best episodes of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*? Hurry up and choose because Channel 4 are about to screen *Stephen King's Top Ten Drive-In Diners of The Summer of 89*.

What is this obsession with lists? It's tempting to see it as a product of the mid/late-1990s, its exemplar being Rob, the thirtysomething protagonist of Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* (Gollancz, 1995); but the author was only portraying a mostly male archetype, not inventing a new social phenomenon. My brother-in-law, for example, has hundreds of homemade, self-chosen compilation tapes such as *Best of Bob Marley*, *Best of Earth, Wind And Fire* and to my knowledge never listens to a whole CD at one go. He's been on this project since at least the mid-1970s!

The cataloguing and choosing craze does seem to have grown exponentially over the past few years. This is mostly due to the fact that the people who run the TV, radio and magazine media are at an age where they're becoming wistful for the apparent joys of their youth and, more pertinently, technology has enabled these ersatz memories to be preserved on videotape for end-less replays of *Top Ten Slapstick Moments From The Word* and *Great TV Soap Weddings, Funerals and Fisticuffs*. There's a whole little Z-list celebrity cottage industry entirely sustained by these shows – Stuart Maconie, Emma B and Miranda Sawyer. (By the way, Miranda, what's with the diagonal fringe? Did the pudding bowl slip whilst your mother was cutting it in front of the mirror? Get a proper hairstyle, girl, and we might take your opinions a mite more seriously!)

Even TTA's cool sister publication *The Fix* has hopped onto this lumbering bandwagon by running a regular guest author feature on 'My Top Ten Stories'. No, Andy, this isn't a hint that I want to be asked – where would I start, anyway? Kafka's 'Josephine the Singer' at number one but after that – can I include the whole of Ballard's output as one entry and how much room does that leave for Borges and Ambrose Bierce?

Two of the obvious difficulties one faces when compiling lists are definitions and omissions. Genesis and Hawkwind were both recently featured in a *Top Ten Progressive Rock*. It's a pretty broad church that includes Peter Gabriel's quaint English pastoral nursery rhymes and the sonic assassins' relentlessly riffing space barbarism. A few years back, in an absolutely cracking issue which I've still got on my bookcase, the magazine *Mojo* proclaimed its '100 Best Psychedelic Songs Ever' along with features on Arthur Lee, Syd Barrett and so forth. Yet there was nary a mention of Procol Harum's 'A Whiter Shade of Pale', number one during July 1967, the original acid-drenched Summer of Love! Just who is rewriting and therefore narrowing down our artistic heritage? I'm tempted to come over all media student conspiracy theoryish and suggest that it suits the powers that be to have us all wallow in a weekly bubble bath of frothy nostalgia and be shoehorned into cultural consensus. Oh, look at those punks! Zips and pins and pink spiked hair. How kitsch! Glue and heroin and social disaffection – whatever happened to them? Are we going to be plugged into our vid-screens twenty-five years down the line reminiscing fondly about the gun culture that's reputedly attached itself to bands such as So Solid Crew?

Lists are just a displacement activity to stop you thinking about real things. Chit-chat has been elevated to high art. Is everything so borrowed and meaningless today? Or is this all just a cloak obscuring thought and discussion about the important and politically hypersensitive issues of the modern world?

The thing which annoyed me most, though, was the Summer and Autumn's almost interminable quest to 'discover the greatest ever Briton'. Had this been a proper historical investigation into the truth behind King Arthur/Merlin/Robin Hood/The Pedlar of Swaffham, I might have raised enough interest to tune in once or twice. But basically it was 'Vote For Your Favourite Dead Celebrity' given spurious significance by endless TV plugs and the headmistress tones of winking Anne Robinson. And what a

motley bunch we had to choose from: a Scouse songwriter who once offered out Muhammad Ali and then spent a week in bed for the benefit of the paparazzi; a celebrated versifier whose output was decidedly patchy (have any of you endured *The Winter's Tale*?); a cigar chomping anti-communist who could only . . . talk in phrases . . . sometimes so few . . . sometimes so many; or a bloke who built bridges. Now, I'm all for democracy and popular choice and think we should have a lot more of it rather than being bossed around by the nanny state but the corollary is that your neighbours will tend to smother out your own hard-won opinions and Westlife will have as many number ones as The Beatles. The only surprise was that the country's top photogenic pairing of David and Victoria Beckham didn't place higher. Must be losing their touch. And as for Princess Diana . . . couldn't hack it in a privileged life which demanded a little duty, shagged the England rugby captain, cried on *Panorama*, hugged a couple of poor African kids dying of AIDS. 'Great' is not the adjective which immediately springs to mind. Ah, but she's tragic and ultimately a failure and by God we love our failures more than our heroes – Tim Henman, Gazza, Captain Scott, all the way back to mighty Queen Boudicca. (Incidentally, she was second on my list behind Queen Elizabeth I. Must have a thing about red-haired women!)

Hands up now: do you know anybody who describes themselves as a Briton or even British? Aside from a few marching fascists, it's all 'Londoner', 'English', 'Irish', 'Bengali', 'Scottish', 'Black', 'Welsh' and so on. With devolution given to those across the borders, the foot-soldiers of the legion of Saint George are asking when is it our turn for some self-government? Many in London would like to see the M25 not as a road but as a moat around the embattled capital!

But I digress . . . The music magazine *Q* ran a tag line, 'Towards the best in everything' which is a laudable aim but shouldn't just be about making endless self-referential lists. I fear that it's a sign of stagnation in Western culture that we seem so ready to tot everything up and close the shop for the weekend. We are already well into the new millennium, we should be mostly looking forward . . . However, as there currently seems no end to this trend, maybe I should look on the bright side and hope for better quality celebs and subjects. Perhaps *Her Majesty The Queen Presents One's Most Expensive to Maintain Royal Palaces* or Tony 'Cheshire Cat' Blair hosts *The Labour Party's Top Ten Political Porkies*.

Crow Man



The wind whistled around the new magistrates court on the top of the hill. Outside, diggers carved up the land, finishing the new housing estate. The giant houses were raw against the bleached January fields, the hill dropping away to the bypass, the sodden water meadows and the river. A man stood nervously in the dock of court one. His head was shaved and hard, his belly was soft. Three silvery magistrates sentenced him to eight weeks in prison. The security guards clicked on handcuffs, and he turned towards the door, rueful. He had a livid lovebite on his neck.

My mobile rang. I stood up from the press bench, now the focus of attention. Outside in the waiting area, I sidled to the window, turned away from the gallery of bored young men. "Marie," I said. "What is it?"

"It's Julian," she said. Her voice was clear and hard. "His mother called me. She can't get in touch with him. She expects me to go round, and I won't. But . . . well, I do want to know if he's okay." The hard tone faltered momentarily. "Would you go?"

"Is he still in the caravan?"

"Yes." She waited.

"I'll go round later. After work."

"Right," she said. Then, "Thanks. Let me know, won't you."

"Yes. Marie? Are you okay?" But she had hung up.

The rain came down in squalls. I had no torch. The lane was muddy and evil, long puddles lying in ruts, through the copse with its cold, black trees. At the end, the caravan was a dim white form, a light just visible through a curtained window. Close up, tumbled sheds emerged from the darkness. Somewhere nearby chickens were in a coop, little squawks and flappings just audible. The rain swept against my face. I banged on the caravan door. Moments passed. I banged again. Then I tried the latch. The door was stiff, but it wasn't locked. "Julian? Julian?" I stepped inside. I hadn't seen him in so long. A year maybe. I had known where he was living, but I had always been too busy to drop by. And time passed, and it became easier and easier to forget. "Julian?"

"What d'you want?" He was sitting at the far end, wrapped in a blanket. An oil lamp burned on the table.

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Yeah? I'm doing fine, thank you." He didn't move. I crept closer. The carpet was sticky under my feet. The caravan smelled damp, vaguely fungal, and another unpleasant scent of animal decay, like the chickens, like old feathers.

"I'm sorry about you and Marie," I said. I sat, cautiously, opposite him. He stared at the window, peering through a chink in the curtains. "I said I'm sorry about you and Marie. I couldn't believe it. After all you've been through."

Some sort of emotional current galvanised him then, but he still didn't look at me. "Because of all we've been through," he said. "Few relationships survive it, you know. Statistically speaking. We fell upon the wrong side. The out group."

I looked around the caravan, under the cover of his inattention. Every inch of wall, every cupboard, every surface, even the low ceiling, was plastered with pieces of paper scrawled with diagrams and notes. The light was too dim to make out much detail, but in some curious fashion he was continuing the project he had undertaken at Feisals.

"How can you work - out here I mean? I thought you'd left. Are you freelancing?"

At last he turned to look at me. It was a shock, seeing his face. He clearly hadn't shaved or washed for some time. His hands, clasped upon the table, were grimy, fingernails black. "You look . . . efficient," he said.

"Efficient? What does that mean?"

"Together. In good order. Correct functioning."

"You don't."

"No. Then again, yes. I am merely working in a different order. And you come here, and you pollute me. I want you to go." He was neither rude nor insulting. He sounded perfectly rational and level.

"They're worried about you," I said. "Your mum. Marie."

"So they sent you. An emissary. How long have you cared?"

I could think of no response to this. I took out a bottle of whiskey from my bag, unscrewed the top, and took three large, biting gulps. Then I pushed it over to him. His eyes fastened on the bottle, but he hesitated.

"I brought some stuff to eat," I said. "I guess you haven't been out much."

Julian sighed. He picked up the bottle and drank. I put bread and cheese and pastries on the table, and he fell upon them, eating the lot. His hair was thinning on the top now. The light picked out silver strands in the greasy, jet black. On his chin, too.

"You're not eating?" he said. But it was too late. He had taken everything.

"No," I said. And he laughed, throwing back his head. He took another giant swig from the bottle and stretched out his legs. His face was flushed. He gave out a peculiar heat.

Sarah Singleton

"Well then," he said. "Little Laurie come to see me. You temptress. You've thrown me off track now. I was thinking. I was nearly there."

"Yes? Nearly where? Are you still working on the same thing?"

"How's Marie?"

"I haven't seen her for a couple of weeks – but last time, I think she was okay. You know, bearing up."

"Does she miss me?"

"I don't know," I said, carefully.

"Little Laurie, prevaricating. Why don't you tell me she's glad to be shot of me at last? That she's putting everything behind her?"

My phone buzzed in my pocket. A message flashed, from the paper. Was I sorry, or relieved? "Look, I've got to go now," I said. "I'm sorry. I'll come back on Saturday. Can I get you anything?" Julian shook his head. I reached out for the whiskey bottle, but he stayed my hand. The heat of his skin seemed to burn. "Keep it then," I said. I headed for the door. But he called out. He stood up, and rummaged on the counter by the stewed mess in the sink.

"My work," he said. "Have a look and see what you think." He picked up a match box, pulled it open, and discarded it. Then another. He reached to the back for a tobacco tin. He lifted it to his ear. Apparently satisfied, he pushed it into my hand. I stepped outside; the rain gusted into the doorway. "I hate January," he said. Then he slammed the door shut, and I picked my way through the wet, broken earth to the road.

My house was cold, empty. Water dripped from my hair. My boots were caked with red-dish mud. My coat, hung to dry, began to exude the perfume of Julian's caravan.

Julian's tin was light and rattled when I shook it. I wasn't sure if I wanted to open it, but I did. The lid clicked off. A breath of animal scent puffed up into my face.

Feathers, shell and bone. I tipped them onto the table, spread them out. Half an eggshell, pale blue, heavily flecked with brown, about as long as my thumb. I thought of the birds I had heard in a coop near the caravan. Downy dark grey feathers, tiny fragments of bark and mud, lengths of delicate bone. And something dried up, shrivelled. A tiny bird embryo, some poor creature plucked prematurely from its shell, now desiccated and flattened. The eye still bulged. Tiny, fragile claws were lifted into its belly, folded up.

I scooped up the remains and dropped them back into the tin.

In daylight, the copse seemed smaller. High up, in the turrets of the trees, the crows cawed. The sky shone through, bright blue. The wind was bitter. The birds' nests were exposed in the ash and sycamore trees, messy knots of twig in bare branches.

I shouldered two bags of groceries, and another bottle of whiskey.

Julian was standing outside the caravan, in a T-shirt, apparently impervious to the cold. Historic smears of mud and wet wood painted his clothes. He waved. "Laurie, good to see you!" He took the bags. "How kind," he said graciously. "Thank you."

He was full of smiles today, but his jocularity made me uncomfortable. He had a peculiar boyish earnestness. He wiped his nose on his arm and grinned. He was tending to the chickens. Several pyramid coops dotted the ground around the caravan. In each, two or three parti-coloured bantams scuttled in a muddy trench.

"So, are you going to show me what you're working on?" I asked.

Julian nodded. He led me the old sheds by the caravan. One was an old rail carriage, now grounded, wooden sides peeling blue paint. He pulled open the sliding door. "Come on," he said impatiently, but I held back. "It's okay," he said. "Look."

Inside, the carriage was warm. Some kind of incubator, maybe taken from Feisals, stood in the middle of the floor. The gleaming device hummed. "How do you power it?"

"I've got a little generator, behind the caravan. Don't run it all the time, just enough to keep the batteries charged. It's a field device, you see. I helped develop it."

"You're breeding bantams."

He shook his head. "Look."

Dimly, in the glow of the electrical device, a clutch of eggs nestled. Blue and flecked, like the shell in the tobacco tin.

"What kind of bird?" I said. Then I pointed up, to the tree tops. "Them? The crows?"

Julian nodded excitedly.

"Why?" I asked. "I don't understand. What you were doing at Feisals –"

"That was something different, don't you see? This is something new."

"But what? What are you trying to do?"

But he pushed me out of the old goods carriage and pulled the door closed. "Come and have food," he said. "We'll have a drink. I'll explain everything."

Julian didn't eat, but opened the whiskey and began to drink. The diagrams pinned to the walls looked less like science now, and more like some kind of witchcraft.

"How's your life?" he asked.

"Efficient, as you said."

"Did I say that? D'you remember when we went to Yorkshire, on the field trip, and we stood high up on the moors with all the marshes and birds, and the broken slabs of rock, and I said you'd surpass us all because you knew just what you wanted?"

"How wrong can you be? You got a first and I dropped out."

"But you were right – you didn't want to be part of it, the way it was all going."

"No. I was going to be a journalist and expose all the hidden secrets, all the bad stuff. Hey, and look at me now. I got nowhere."

Julian considered, twisting the bottle in his hand. "You've done okay."

"No," I said. "No, I haven't."

"I'm going to get her back," he said.

"Marie?"

"My work – the crows. No, not Marie."

"You mean Verity?" It's funny how hard that word had become to speak.

"Verity," he said.

"Julian. You can't get her back."

He looked out the window. "Did you know Marie had a miscarriage? We kept it quiet – she wanted to. But I bet she told you. January 19th. A year and a day before Verity was born. Another little girl." He kept his face to the window, as though watching something intently.

"What d'you mean, you want to get her back?" The last time I saw Verity was in the hospital. Her skin was oddly translucent, but underneath her flesh was yellow. She was losing her hair. I can't tell you what it did to me, seeing her like that. God knows what Julian and Marie went through.

"The week, when they couldn't do anything more, when we brought her home," Julian said. "She was lying in bed, in her room. Me and Marie, we took it in turns. Someone was with her all the time. I read her lots and lots of stories, and we talked about stuff. She could see out the window, over the back garden and the fields the other side. And I wasn't going to work, or going out. And everything started to crystallise then. Everything we saw outside the window was like a sign, a message; everything related to Verity and me, and what we were thinking. And one morning we saw a huge moon rising up behind the silver birch tree and one crow sitting in the branches. She called the birch the white lady. And I said, 'Look, the crow has come to say goodbye to you.' You think that's bad? She knew she was going to die. She wanted to talk about it – to know what would happen to her. But what did I know? So I told her the crow had come to watch over her. And then, the next morning, the crow was there again, in the same place. It kept coming back, all through the day. And the following morning there were three of them. Verity said, 'You were right Daddy, they've come to say goodbye, for all the birds.' It was spooky. Verity told Marie, all excited, and I don't think Marie was sure I'd said the right thing, but it was only a

little story I'd made up. Just a weird coincidence, all these crows turning up. But the next morning even Marie was spooked, because the tree was thick with crows – maybe twenty – and they flapped and cawed around the garden all day. Verity wouldn't let me scare them away. Her court of crows. Her guard of honour. She was thrilled. But then that night she went downhill, very fast, and she wouldn't wake up. She could hardly breathe. Such a struggle. It went on for hours, and you know what? I wanted her to die then, to make an end of it. The doctor came round, and the cancer nurse, but they couldn't do anything except give her morphine. She was slipping away. Outside, in the dark, the crows were making a racket. The doctor didn't take any notice – they were only birds to him. But I knew by then. I wrapped her up in a blanket and I took her downstairs, and out into the back garden, and the crows flew all around us. I could hear their wings. I could *feel* them. And Verity's spirit seeped away. Her body went so still. And the crows circled up, and drew her away with them. And I was left on my own, with this fragile basket of bones lying in my arms."

I peered outside, through the green stripes and the frost, to the trees where the crows roosted. "It's a magical story," I said.

"Don't humour me."

"So. How is this going to get her back?"

"No good comes from me. My seed is corrupt," he said.

"Julian, what do you mean, about getting her back?"

But he didn't answer. He drank again, sinking slowly into stupor. Later he fell asleep, slumped over the table. I wandered round the caravan, trying to make sense of his notes and drawings, arcana from witchcraft books scrawled over diagrams of dissections, photocopies of DNA sequences spliced with drawings from alchemical texts. Bottles, beasts, angels.

Outside the bantams huddled in their runs. I went to the old, leaning sheds. The doors were tied in place with baling twine. When I opened the first, a shot of sunlight caused an instant commotion, a panic. The confined space stank of birds – feathers and foul straw and shit. Stacked up against the rear wall were a dozen or so wooden crates, chicken wire pinned over the open end, and inside each one, a wicked-looking crow.

They hopped and flapped, giant things, banging their wings helplessly against the mesh. Should I let them out? Instead, I closed the door again.

In the next shed, a dead bird was pinned out on a board. An old filing cabinet was stuffed with haphazard notes and files he'd taken from Feisals. In the top drawer I found syringes, tiny drug bottles, also from Feisals. Hormone injections probably. For fertility. How else could he induce the birds to lay out of season?

The Feisals project. He hadn't told me much. It was something to do with poultry breeding, a gene therapy. No three-legged

chickens, he had assured me. Something more worthwhile. Developing immunities to disease, and hardy, productive birds for the developing world. Finally, he was thrown out. Two months ago, after Marie had left him. Everything had fallen apart.

Except for this. I knew I should phone Marie, or a doctor, or the police.

I went back into the caravan. Julian was still asleep. I prised the whiskey bottle from his hand and drank the rest.

"Laurie?" He was stroking my face. "Wake up," he said gently. "It's dark. Look."

"Julian . . . the birds, you've got to let them go."

"I know," he nodded. His face was very calm now, and intent. He reached out and pushed back the hair from my eyes. He looked at me anxiously, then said, "Come on then, help me."

He lit the paraffin lamp, took my hand and led me out to the sheds. When Julian untied the door the crows screeched and banged in the boxes. He dragged them out, one by one. I unclipped the chicken wire, folded it back, and each time the prisoner exploded from the box, knocking me with giant wings, feathers clattering. How big they were – maybe unnaturally so. Had Julian dosed them with growth hormones?

Julian was jubilant. "Do you like them? My sons. My babies." He danced on the spot. He hollered and whooped – and far up, the crows replied. Then he looked at me. "Laurie," he said. "Laurie, you're trembling." He took hold of my hand. "What's up? Aren't you happy? I let them go – for you."

"I know," I said. But my voice was choked. The night was very cold, and in the wood and frost I felt distinct and apart, the whiskey, perhaps, still working in the pathways of my brain. Julian put his hand on my neck, stroking my cheek with his thumb. Like electricity, a magical current. Nerves fired. I took a breath, held it. Julian kept his eyes fixed upon me. I didn't move, or speak. He reached out his other hand and I stepped towards him, against him. The contact, along the entire length of my body, seemed to burn. So long. It had been so long. I had forgotten what it felt like, this rush. I took another deep breath. My heart beat hard against my ribs, like the birds in their boxes.

We went back into the caravan. At the far end, on a filthy pile of blankets and sleeping bags, I lay down. Julian's face was blurred above me. He rummaged through my clothes, my hand cold on the smooth, warm flesh of my belly.

In the morning we lay together, naked in the curtained gloom. "I always used to think Marie had everything," I said. "She was cleverer than me. And better looking. And she got you."

"Some deal," he sniffed. He was different now. We had made love again, but it wasn't the same as the night before. I was conscious of how he smelled, and the rough growth

of hair on his face, the flecks of mould on the yellow blanket.

"I haven't been with anyone in three years," I said. "I live on my own. I hate my job. I know you've . . . lost everything. But what have I got?"

"You've got me now. You have. Come out," he said. "Now - no clothes. I want to show them."

"I can't - it's too cold. I'll freeze."

"No - just shoes. Now. They want to see."

"It's too cold. No."

He grabbed my arm, pulled me off the bed and dragged me outside. The air was biting cold, the sun still low, beaming through the trees. He held me in front of him, pinning my arms by my sides.

"Look!" he shouted. "Come!"

The sound seemed to dislodge the crows from their roost, and like pieces of black paper they unfolded, launching from the branches, sweeping down, calling out.

"Let me go!" I said. "You shit, let me go, you're hurting me!"

And he laughed and pushed me away so that I fell on my knees into the freezing mud. The crows flapped down, huge and inky, each as big as a swan now. I warded them off with my hands, and called to Julian for help, but the crows beat down, pressing against me with huge wings and soft, black feathers. They covered my face and belly, and they pressed between my thighs, till the wood went dark and my ears were full of the din of their cries.

I woke up in the caravan again, wrapped

in the soiled bed clothes. It was about mid-day, but I couldn't find my watch or mobile. Julian had disappeared. I was bitterly cold. I found my clothes and dressed, but the chill had soaked right into my bones. My skin was sore - a hundred tiny scrapes and nips, which burned when I moved.

I ran my fingers through my hair, and glanced up at the mirror over the sink. On my forehead another scratch, a bigger one. I touched it, gently. It was not an injury, but something else. Dirt, perhaps. On my fingertip a red, powdery residue remained. I looked in the mirror again, more closely now. Drawn on - a symbol of some kind. One of Julian's alchemical figures. A cold thought. I returned to the bed and found among the litter of papers pinned to the wall four at the cardinal points, marked out with the same red chalk. I had to get away.

Julian was standing outside the railway carriage.

"You fucker, you Frankenstein shithead, what did you think you were doing to me? I'm going, freako. I'm never coming back. I shall tell Marie. I'll get you sectioned."

"Laurie," he called. Then, more gently, "Laurie. Before you go. See. Come here. See." He had his gentle little-boy face on again. As though nothing had happened. "This way," he urged. "Look." His expression arrested me momentarily. "Just give me one more chance - just look," he pleaded.

I sighed, and followed him into the wooden carriage, where the incubator lay. The machine hummed. The low light gave it an

eerie glimmer. Beneath the plastic lid the eggs were gathered together. But one was moving. One pale blue, brown-flecked egg wobbled among the others. A crack spread, from the top.

"It has no beak," Julian said. "You need a beak to break through a shell. I have to help." Gently he opened the incubator. He scooped up the cracked egg and laid it in the palm of his left hand. He drew out a surgical scalpel from his pocket, and with the utmost care, broke into the shell. He pried it open, very slowly. "You see?" he said.

Inside the shell, the small, pink, naked creature stretched out its limbs. Its body was coated in a clear, gluey film. It coughed, clearing its lungs. Big eyes bulged. Its lips parted. The infant let out a tiny hiccup, and a cry. Julian wrapped the baby in a handkerchief and tucked it carefully inside his shirt, in a pouch he must have prepared in readiness, so the creature would rest against his skin.

"You see," he said, eyes bright. "All things are possible."

Should I have a termination? Every morning a crow greets me from a fence post outside my house. They circle around the new magistrates court when I work. I don't believe in his pseudo science, or his magic. His caravan was burned to the ground, and the sheds. But he wasn't there, and I don't know where he has gone.

Sarah Singleton works as a reporter in Wiltshire. Her first novel *The Crow Maiden* was published by in 2002 by Cosmos Books.

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*they waited in the shadows
and while we slept*

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THE FACTS OF LIFE

Graham Joyce

Gollancz hb, 263pp, £12.99

review & interview by Sandy Auden



A Graham Joyce novel is like a salve for the soul. His deft use of words, coupled with his lyrical style, induces a near-hypnotic euphoria that dissolves away all your real-life niggles. From his opening paragraph, you're happy to relinquish control of your imagination, sit back and let him lead you on a tour of his imagination. For this outing, Joyce is taking us to Coventry around the time of the Second World War. The Vine family consists of Martha, her seven daughters and their respective partners. The youngest daughter Cassie is, like her mother, prone to prophetic visions and psychic phenomena. When her son is born out of wedlock, Cassie is deemed unfit to bring the boy up – due to her funny turns – and Frank's childhood is spent growing up in his aunt's very eccentric households. Like all families, there are some skeletons hidden in their collective cupboards but Frank, it seems, hides the biggest one of them all.

As usual, this is a Joyce novel that's hard to categorise. It's not really adventure, though it has some action in it; it's not really a supernatural tale although it does have some psychic aspects. It does, however, have an extensive and highly endearing domestic content and a steady, slightly sedate, pace. It's really a thoughtful little gem and as such, it's not going to appeal to everybody.

Sitting underneath *The Facts of Life*, the structure of the story communicates Frank's unsettling childhood at an almost subconscious level. With the focus moving to each aunt in turn, it is easy to understand how Frank must have felt being repeatedly uprooted. However, by ending the story without a specific life direction for the boy, and with many of the events unexplained, there's an uneasy impression of disorientation. While it's certainly an enjoyable journey, it feels like you've been stopped slightly short of your destination and you really would like to carry on with the trip. It may be the lack of closure or it might just be Joyce's knack at engaging your interest so much that wherever he stops, you'll emerge blinking back into reality.

And one of his most engaging features is his characters. In fact, to say Joyce writes character driven stories is a bit like saying Clive Barker writes about tense situations. So it's no surprise that *The Facts of Life* not only contains some multifaceted personalities but also some fascinating interactions as they all collide with each others' flaws, careening off in unexpected directions, creating humour and consternation in their wake.

Joyce is simply formidable. There's a deceptive depth to *The Facts of Life* that, along with a sophistication and smoothness of sound, intensifies his narrative and lifts it to a new level.

SA: *The Facts of Life* exhibits an unusual structure. Was it a conscious decision to build the story that way?

GJ: Yes, it was, because I didn't want it to be a classic tale of the supernatural, where the psychic events get more and more dramatic towards the end of the book and then there's a climax. What I wanted was to have the supernatural events intrude into the lives of these characters every now and again – like a blip. I wanted it to be something that just arrived and people didn't question it or deal with it. You see, normally, when you structure a supernatural thriller, your characters have to deal with the supernatural event – they have to get to the bottom of it, to solve it and, eventually, to resolve it. And that's just what I didn't want with *The Facts of Life* because I was making the point that a lot of people just live with this kind of thing, they accept it and just get on with their lives.

SA: How much of the story was based on your own family?

GJ: The characters were my mum's relatives, rather than my own immediate family. The matriarchal figure of Martha is loosely based on my grandmother and my mum was one of seven daughters so I had all these aunts when I was young. They all became models for the characters in *The Facts of Life*. And my grandmother really did have those kinds of prophetic visions. They are, in fact, the very material I've been writing about for years. I've always avoided using these stories until now – for reasons which I don't entirely understand myself – but I suddenly felt that I needed to write about them. *The Facts of Life* may not be autobiographical but it does draw upon lots of autobiographical family anecdotes and weave them into the matrix of

the story. Apart from that, my mother's family wasn't as eccentric as the Vines, and they didn't have anyone as dysfunctional as Cassie.

SA: Why do you think you felt it necessary to document grandma's experiences?

GJ: I guess I'd been thinking about the deep impression she'd made on me when I was a child. And I really wanted to explore the way a strong matriarchal figure could make a really big impression on all the people around her. With family units being the way they are today, I'm not sure that we'll see a character like that again because people are tied in different ways these days. In the Vines' kind of family, the idea of them all getting together and swapping tales with each other was quite central to their everyday life. Today, everyone watches telly and talks about Soap Operas or Reality TV, rather than talking about their personal lives. What's wrong with their own Reality TV? When I was a kid, my mum's family would endlessly discuss their own lives with each other, just like the characters in *The Facts of Life*. There was enough interesting stuff going on for my aunts to talk about it all. And then there was the retelling of the stories. My aunts would come alive when they were retelling their stories – their faces would become animated and there would be a sheen in their eyes as the stories unfolded. I think TV has contributed towards the loss of all that.

SA: Was it always such a good life?

GJ: Oh no! And I didn't romanticise the era in *The Facts of Life* either because there were feuds going on that would mean that one aunt would walk past another aunt's house everyday without speaking, and it would go on for many years in some cases. I haven't made a sugary vision of it but I do have this feeling that people related to each other in a very different way back then.

SA: Apart from a strong sense of family, how else did grandma influence you?

GJ: There were her prophetic visions, and these impressed me tremendously as a boy. What was very interesting about it was that she never chased it. She didn't particularly welcome it and it seemed to be more of a curse than a blessing for her. Not that she was unduly frightened by it. It was just something that she didn't want, didn't want to invite in – so she just treated it as a nuisance. It was, however, very real and the truth of her powers was confirmed over and over again by my own mother and her sisters. They all accepted grandma's powers and I grew up with that acceptance too, so I've never been a total sceptic about paranormal things. I know that you can't scientifically test for the paranormal and I also know a lot of people that feel very impatient about the fact. But I know on an experiential level that lots of people have these strange experiences which can't be explained away and it just leaves them hanging. They can't do anything about it, so they just get on with their lives. I wanted to reflect this in *The Facts of Life*. These people never discover the secret of their experiences, they never unravel the mystery, it just happens, like the weather. And they live with it like the weather. Just as a storm might come one day – for these people, one day might produce some strange psychic disturbance. They experience that disturbance then they carry on with their lives, doing the washing up or fetching the shopping. I wanted to write about this co-existence, about the fantastic and the domestic, side by side.

CONJUNCTIONS 39: THE NEW WAVE FABULISTS

Edited by Peter Straub

Bard College pb, 433 pp, \$15

reviewed by Jeff Topham

I abominate the term 'slipstream'. I loathe and abhor it. The term, however, points to something important: over the last few years, a small group of writers has steadily been producing excellent work that uses the techniques of 'literary' fiction to explore the themes, imagery, and philosophical skepticism particular to sf/f/h. This cross-pollination between genre fiction and the literary mainstream is especially apparent in the work of new writers such as Kelly Link, Patrick O'Leary, Andy Duncan, China Miéville and Nalo Hopkinson, all of whom contribute stories to the latest issue of *Conjunctions*, the literary magazine published by Bard College. Under the guidance of guest editor Peter Straub, *Conjunctions 39: The New Wave Fabulists* assembles a fine collection of crossgenre fiction that includes new work by many of the best writers of the last two decades, including John Crowley, Jonathan Lethem, John Kessel, Karen Joy Fowler,

Elizabeth Hand and Neil Gaiman. Lest we conclude that this is a new phenomenon, Straub also includes work by Gene Wolfe, Joe Haldeman (both represented by excerpts from forthcoming novels) and M. John Harrison, whose presence links the aesthetic agenda of this issue of *Conjunctions* directly to the New Wave of the 1960s.

The list of contributors creates an expectation of quality that is largely fulfilled by the stories themselves, and *The New Wave Fabulists* is certainly one of the strongest original anthologies of 2002. That said, I should note that while the quality of the work here is extremely high, there's not much that's particularly groundbreaking. The significant exceptions are Kelly Link's 'Lull' and Nalo Hopkinson's 'Shift', both of which experiment in intriguing ways with narrative and point of view. 'Lull' is the most formally adventurous of the stories here, a series of symmetrical frame stories that nestle inside each other like Russian dolls. It suffers a bit, however, from a kitchen sink approach that combines a story of midlife stasis with aliens, vegetable clones, time travel, and the Devil fooling around in a darkened closet with a cheerleader who is living backwards. Even if it doesn't quite work, at least it's flawed in some interesting ways. 'Shift' is both more successful and less ambitious, although Hopkinson makes effective use of alternating first- and second-person viewpoints in this Caribbean re-envisioning of the characters of Ariel and Caliban.

Most of the collection consists of more traditional work that ranges from good to outstanding. Jonathan Carroll offers the engagingly weird 'Simon's House of Lipstick', whose unlikable protagonist grudgingly serves as a tour bus guide for (on this particular day) a blind woman, a couple of cartoon characters, and a six-foot bag of caramels. Something important is going on behind all the dreamlike scenery, however, which is conspiring to nudge the dense and narcissistic Simon ever closer to self-knowledge. Like much of Carroll's work, this one is distinguished by its imaginative exuberance and offbeat sense of humor. Karen Joy Fowler's 'The Further Adventures of the Invisible Man' is a charming story focusing on its adolescent protagonist Nathan, whose absent father has (perhaps) been abducted by aliens. A youthful misdemeanor leads Nathan to a stint playing baseball, which Fowler imagines as a hilariously strange form of redemptive suffering. The story is buoyed by the seeming effortlessness of Fowler's prose as well as a lovely mixture of humor and a keen irony. Most of the details of Andy Duncan's wonderful 'The Big Rock Candy Mountain' are drawn from an old ballad describing a hobo paradise in which cigarettes grow on trees, peppermints fall from the sky, and hot stew bubbles up from the ground like lava. It's a paradise of perfect indolence unmarred by work, which is strictly forbidden, of course. There's no story without discontent, however, and when two characters re-enter the 'real' world, they find themselves back in the realm of sickness, suffering and death. Duncan spins his tale in a relaxed, colloquial style, and while this may be the least 'literary' of the stories collected here, it's also one of the most appealing.

Among the strongest pieces of the collection is its brilliant opener, John Crowley's 'The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines', in which a debate over the authorship of Shakespeare's plays deepens into an obsession that literally becomes crippling. The story is ultimately a rejection of the search for secret histories and encrypted meanings, making it in some sense an anti-fantasy and a strange start to the collection. It is nonetheless a superb story that works in a subtle but complex fashion, its beautiful final image capturing the complexity of its themes in a powerful but succinct fashion. It doesn't take long to realize that the angel of M. John Harrison's 'Entertaining Angels Unawares' is the Angel of Death, embodied here in two contrasting forms. The affable Sal experiences a recurring dream in which he roams the streets of a decaying Victorian city swinging a huge sword and decapitating everyone he meets. The truly virulent character, however, is Sal's brooding partner Mike, who longs to share Sal's dream but is capable only of a petty meanness. An exceptional story that reminded me I've been remiss in letting Harrison's recent work slip by.

Peter Straub's 'Little Red's Tango' is an odd piece about a reclusive jazz enthusiast and record collector whose life leaves an impression strangely out of proportion to its modest details. The story maps (rather loosely) onto Little Red certain details from the life of Christ – Little Red performs miracles, converses with demons, and resurrects a dead cat. The story's biggest accomplishment is Straub's ability to bring this eccentric character and his cluttered apartment – teeming with mounds of records, empty beer bottles and dirty dishes – vigorously to life. Books leave their mark on us, forever changing the way

in which we see the world. This idea is explored with particular grace and beauty in Elizabeth Hand's novella 'The Least Trumps', which, along with last year's 'Cleopatra Brimstone', confirms Hand as one of the most powerful contemporary authors of the fantastic. Ivy, the protagonist of 'The Least Trumps', has been changed by such a book, but it is not until its imagery has been literally written on her flesh that worlds both real and imagined can be transformed and healed. A beautiful story that demonstrates the power of the fantastic to illuminate our experience in startling and moving ways.

The collection wraps up with a pair of essays from Gary K. Wolfe and John Clute placing the fantastic in historical and cultural perspective. Add to this a series of delightful illustrations by Gahan Wilson, and you have an irresistible package. Call it whatever you like – 'crossgenre' or even 'slipstream' if you have to. In the end, the stories in *The New Wave Fabulists* are simply great fiction, and perhaps that's the only designation that really matters.

THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPEN

M. John Harrison

Night Shade Books, 450pp, £27hb/\$15pb

reviewed by Andrew Hook



The cover of this collection echoes Katherine Mansfield's short story 'Feuille d'album' where, what would be considered nowadays as a stalker, a young man surprises the object of his desire by saying 'you dropped this' whilst subsequently handing her an egg. Finding in the introduction that Harrison mentions Mansfield is intriguing, because both, in their own way, hand the reader unbroken eggs – which, once cracked, reveal themselves to have singular and peculiar interiors.

These twenty-four stories, ranging across Harrison's career from 1975 to 2000, are intended to push forward his reputation in an American market, which, it seems from the blurb, has yet to fully embrace him. Although there is nothing new here for Harrison aficionados, the breadth of the collection serves to emphasise the durability of Harrison's work, whilst also enabling insights into the almost organic evolution of his thought processes, such as the embryonic development of characters Mick, Choe, and Isobel Ashton who latterly were given full flow in the novel *Signs of Life*.

The writing frequently cuts so intensely that even when Harrison emerges as a hybrid of Borges and Kafka, he retains an originality specifically his own. In the imaginary and allusive land of 'Egnaro', whose very existence is registered only in snatches of whispered conversations or assumed moments of tacit articulation, it is the concept that dreams become disillusioned by attainment which grabs the reader rather than the philosophical creation of Egnaro itself. And in 'Settling the World', when the protagonist finally glimpses God as a gigantic beetle, mysticism splits from aversion into quiet incomprehension: 'Why has God come to us this way? We were so eager to accept him. The discrepancy between being alive and actually living often seems to lie at the heart of Harrison's stories.

Sometimes he taps into our fascination with revision, with the reader acting as passive voyeur to propel the text. In 'The New Rays' a woman's obscure, unstated illness necessitates exposure to bizarre medical treatment which appears to have no effect. In this respect Harrison's characters resemble underwater swimmers, holding their breaths as they navigate through the fluidity of their existences, only to surface beneath an oil slick, a skein which clings to them, permeates every pore, and discomforts them; always.

From 'Settling the World' to 'Science & The Arts', each story is imbued with an often transparently beautiful originality. Regardless of any genre conventions, Harrison's strength is in bringing it down to an ordinary level, exposing our hopes and vulnerabilities, as he resonates uncomfortably under our skins. As with Raymond Carver, Harrison unveils the ordinary with frightening aplomb. Take this from 'Gifco': 'Supposing there was something so deep inside you that you never heard from it, something so intricately woven into your personality that it was hidden, something which had nothing but contempt for you. Suppose one day it spoke quite clearly to you, with perhaps a shade of an echo, as if it came from a well, and told you in a clever voice that the things you did were shit. Would you want to

hear it speak again?'

With an introduction by China Miéville and informal story notes by Harrison at the rear, *Things That Never Happen* confirms Harrison's place in the literary firmament. His ability to connect simultaneously with the minutiae and magnificence of life is astonishing.

THE SEPARATION

Christopher Priest

Scribner pb, 464pp, £10.99

reviewed by Mike O'Driscoll



What if, in May 1941, the Red Cross had helped to broker a treaty that brought to an end the war between Britain and Germany? What if Rudolf Hess, instead of being captured in Scotland in that year, had actually succeeded in his mission to bring about a cessation of hostilities between the two countries? Priest is not the first writer to speculate on different outcomes for the second world war – Philip K. Dick, Norman Spinrad, Len Deighton and Robert Harris have all asked the 'what if' question in relation to WWII. But whereas these and other writers and filmmakers have interrogated a world in which Germany defeated the allied forces, Priest poses a more interesting philosophical question, one whose ethical implications resonate more strongly now given the warmongering rhetoric of George W. Bush.

For the post-WWII world on which Priest speculates is not one in which Hitler has kicked British ass, but a world in which, having negotiated and signed a peace treaty a couple of years into the war, Britain and Germany are left free to pursue their own political and imperial interests. For the former, this means the subsequent resignation of Churchill, a consolidation of Empire and the creation of a new, post-war Jewish state on the island of Madagascar. For Germany, following the replacement of Hitler as Chancellor by Hess, it allows a withdrawal of forces from Western Europe and from British colonies in return for a free hand in Russia. Operation Barbarossa results in the eradication of Soviet Communism and the implementation of the Nazi *Lebensraum* policy, a vital part of which involved the building and populating of new German cities in the East.

Most profound of all the consequences of this New World Order, is the fate of the USA, outlined by the novel's framing narrator, Stuart Gratton, a popular social historian, who alludes to the Sino-American war of the mid-40s and the subsequent and prolonged American military involvement in Siberia. Richard Nixon was elected to the presidency in 1960 on a platform of 'bringing our boys back home' but instead committed many more American troops to the conflict. Following her military engagements in the East – termed the 'Third War' – the USA has become even more isolationist, with a heavily censored media, its xenophobic populace governed by criminals and subject to the whims of a frightened, secretive bureaucracy, ironically reminiscent of an East European state of the Cold War era. Although Priest relegates American post-war history to a few paragraphs as Gratton debates whether to commit himself to a project on the social history of the USA from 1960 to 1999, the country itself remains a brooding, troublesome presence lurking in the novel's background. What at first seems a dichotomy between the real and the fictionalised USA, seems, in the light of recent political events, to be more and more a surreal duplication of what, until now, had only been imagined.

Given Priest's previous forays into genre work, particularly in novels such as *A Dream of Wessex*, *The Affirmation* and *The Glamour*, it would be surprising if he was to opt for a conventional alternate world tale. Instead, into this complex framework, he weaves dual narratives which constantly intersect and overlap, complimenting and enriching each other at times, but gradually, insidiously, unravelling into mutually conflicting futures. Turning his back on the American social history project, Gratton begins to research the part played by one J.L. Sawyer in the signing of the armistice of May 1941. Although Sawyer was said to have been a decorated RAF officer, Gratton discovers conflicting evidence that points to his having been a pacifist and registered conscientious objector in the war. The second part of the novel is narrated by Flight Lieutenant Jack Sawyer and details events that occurred between 1936 and 1945. We learn that Jack has an identical twin brother, Joe, and that the pair had won a bronze medal in rowing for Britain at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, their medals

being presented to them by none other than Rudolf Hess. The brothers become estranged over their feelings for Birgit, a young Jewish girl they help to escape from Germany in 1936 and whom Joe subsequently marries. At the outbreak of war, Jack joins the RAF and Joe does indeed register as a conscientious objector. The key part in the tale that follows is Jack's involvement in the interrogation of Rudolf Hess in June 1941, following the latter's capture in Scotland. Jack has been recruited for this special assignment because of his previous encounter with Hess. In a report he drafts for Churchill, he concludes that the man claiming to be Hess – come to Britain on a mission of peace – is in fact an impostor. This follows Jack's earlier claim that, on a morale boosting tour of east London, the part of Churchill was also played by an impostor. Subsequently, Jack's story unfolds to depict a world not dissimilar to our own and we feel safe in assuming that the narrative we have just finished reading – part two of the novel – is in fact an accurate account of Jack's experiences in the war.

At this point Priest hits us with a double whammy. If this is indeed Jack's firsthand account – in the form of notebooks given to Gratton by Jack's daughter to aid his research – then the story it presents contradicts the reality presented to us in the framing narrative. Gratton lives not in a world in which the Allied forces defeated the Axis powers in 1945 – as depicted in Jack's story – but in the alternate world outlined at the start. We have allowed ourselves to be duped by Jack's account because it so readily concurs with our own, but our reality is negated by Gratton's. Priest could well have concluded his book at this point and left his readers satisfied with a daring and thought-provoking variation on the alternate world story. But he's too ambitious to leave it at that and so proceeds both to elucidate and muddy the waters of Jack's narrative. What the author is really interested in is not a particular trope of science fiction – the paraphernalia of alternate worlds – but in the ontological questions raised by the process of fiction writing. Our world intrudes on the fictive world of Gratton through means of Sawyer's notebooks. The latter agree with our version of reality and so confirm the fictional status of Gratton's world. But the truth of Sawyer's notebooks is itself disrupted by further evidence Gratton uncovers in his ongoing research, including an account of Jack's death in May 1941, when his Wellington Bomber crashed into the sea. This account is narrated by the Wellington's navigator, the only survivor of the crash, who, in 1999, is living in 'Masada', the Jewish state formerly known as Madagascar.

But the most serious undermining of Jack Sawyer's narrative comes from a variety of sources which, taken together, relate the story of his brother Joe, a medic for the Red Cross during the Blitz on London. These sources include extracts from Joe's own diary and letters, Cabinet papers and other confidential government documents, newspaper articles and extracts from books on the history of the Red Cross and, tellingly, from Gratton's own book *The Last Day of War*. At times, Joe's story seems to confirm the version of events outlined by Jack, but as we get drawn deeper into his tale, it increasingly denies them, revealing that what we thought was the case was not so at all. This contradiction is brought home to us most explicitly in two crucial sequences: first, when we learn – contrary to what Jack has already told us – that Joe has not been killed during a German bombing raid on London, and secondly, when we discover Joe's direct participation in the negotiations which lead to the successful armistice between Britain and Germany. As you'd expect in an alternate history novel, there are a number of characters and events which appear to mirror each other – Jack and Joe, Hess and Churchill (not to mention their stand-ins), the end of the war in 1941 and its prolongation to 1945, Jack and Birgit and Joe and Birgit – but in the transition between Priest's discordant narratives, events and characters are not so much duplicated as halved. Though Jack and Joe are posited as identical twins, Joe's narrative status is never given an equal footing with his brother's. As the novel progresses, the textual material Gratton uncovers in researching the truth about J.L. Sawyer, serves to erase the history which one version of J.L. Sawyer helped to bring about; the one in which Gratton himself lives.

The most startling of all the narrative manoeuvres that Priest attempts, one which many other authors would either have messed up or avoided altogether, is the mirroring of Gratton – who provides the novel's framing narrative – and Angela Chipperton, source of the narrative – Jack Sawyer's notebooks – which denies Gratton's existence. It would be unfair to give too much away about the nature of their relationship, but suffice to say it raises all sorts of uneasy questions about

the relationship between truth and fiction, between history and reportage. Priest subtly weaves the explication of this strange doubling into the text in such a manner that we only grasp its profound implications towards the novel's close. What it presents is a solipsism in which the two main narrative threads seem to cancel each other out. If this makes it all sound like some kind of self-indulgent literary experiment, then that is most definitely not the case. Priest values his readers too much to subject them to formalist game-playing, but he is not afraid to challenge them, to make certain demands, to question their assumptions about storytelling. In one sense *The Separation* works as a deconstruction of both historical narrative and fiction, pulling the textual rug out from under and causing each to collapse into the other. But unlike most exercises in deconstruction, Priest's writing is spare, precise and elegant, all of which qualities help to ensure the complicity of the reader in the destabilising process.

One would have thought that this preoccupation with the nature of narrative would have left little room for political and social considerations, but for Priest these are inextricably bound up with the way we tell stories and report historical events. What matters is who does the telling, whose version of events is reported, whose believed. Thus instead of the Jewish state of Israel, the Germans and British have colluded to establish a Jewish state in Madagascar. Is this history any less bloody than that between Israel and Palestine? Need you ask? Similarly, Priest asks awkward questions about other events in Gratton's version of history, most tellingly about the role of a USA which remains a political, cultural and scientific backwater still suffering an isolationist, post-war mentality. When you consider Bush junior's political world view (if indeed he had any such view) pre nine/eleven in contrast to his current enthusiasm for military intervention in the internal affairs of other states, any trace of smugness at Priest's portrayal of America is quickly dissipated.

The cumulative effect of reading *The Separation* is akin to the experience of losing religious faith. Just as geology, Darwin, the splitting of the atom and the bloodlust of the twentieth century have undermined faith in a benevolent God, so Priest's dissection of historical and fictional narratives and the forces that shape both, serves to undermine our trust in the reporting of 'real life' events. What we are left with is a striking but unsettling novel, full of vivid detail and profound speculations. In the end, we have a solipsistic narrative which not only negates the possibility of an alternate existence, but also its own. And in denying its own fictional reality, it threatens to destabilise the reality in which we – its readers – act out our lives.

FALLING OUT OF CARS

Jeff Noon

Transworld hb, 345pp, £12.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

The time is the near future and Britain has fallen under the spell of a new disease, the nature of which is never made clear, though it seems akin to mental illness with victims suffering altered perceptions of reality. Most people depend on the drug Lucy (Lucidity) to get them through each day. Society has broken down and is reforming in strange, new patterns. Marlene Moore travels through this blighted landscape in search of the broken shards of a mirror with special properties, perhaps the key to putting the world back together again, her wanderings financed by a wealthy collector, but in reality she is running away from her own life, the memory of her daughter who died of the plague and the sense of responsibility she feels for this tragic loss. The same is true of her travelling companions, the woman Henderson and the man Peacock. All are running away from one thing or another, seeking release in any activity that seems to offer a purpose, however abstract. Only the girl Tupelo, a hitchhiker they pick up and one of the few who is immune to the disease, has any real idea of what she is doing, though ultimately she too is revealed as rudderless. Together these four travel on their obscure mission, encountering miracles and wonders of the new age, but in reality coming to terms with their own condition, the inner emotional storms that batter at their identities.

Noon's latest novel is something of a change of pace, lacking the often relentless creativity of earlier works such as *Vurt*, *Pollen* and *The Automated Alice*. There are of course moments of invention, such as the visit to the museum of fragile things and the idea of books whose text disappears as you read them, and they offer rich food for the imagi-

nation, but these things take place in the background, are incidental detail. *Falling Out of Cars* is more in the nature of a novel of character, reminiscent of books such as Ballard's *The Crystal World*, where emphasis is placed not on the transformations taking place in the world, however strange, but on those within the protagonist. The way in which the book is written, short chapters and with heavy emphasis on dialogue, helps to build up a real narrative pace and Noon's facility at getting under the skin of his characters is remarkable. He makes us identify with these people and care what happens to them, even though they are not wholly admirable individuals. And yet, for all of that, ultimately the backdrop remains a little too vague for the good of the whole, a little too blurred round the edges, with magic and technology in uncomfortable proximity, and so the reader never really gets a handle on what is going on. I was left feeling that I had read a good book, but one that could have been so much better if the author had been willing to share a little more of what he knows instead of coming at things from an angle that always seems to remain willfully oblique.

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF BEST NEW HORROR 13

Edited by Stephen Jones

Robinson pb, 590pp, £6.99

reviewed by Mike O'Driscoll



While not as eclectic in its sources as Datlow & Windling's annual round-up, Stephen Jones nonetheless manages to draw on nineteen different publications in selecting the twenty-three stories collected here. As one would expect there are a number of stories that appear both here and in the Datlow & Windling anthology, each of them deservedly so. Of course, if you've bought both collections you might feel a little short-changed at this duplication but taken together you would be hard pressed to find a more comprehensive selection of the best short horror fiction published in 2001.

As always Jones kicks off with an overview of developments in the genre, citing those novels, anthologies, collections, films and TV shows which made some kind of impact over the last year. The book concludes with a forty page Necrology of all those deceased in 2001 who contributed – sometimes, it has to be said, only marginally – to Horror, and a listing of useful addresses and contacts. And then there are the stories, the formal, thematic and narrational diversity of which makes it all but impossible to pin down Jones on what guides his interpretation of the genre. Chico Kidd gets things underway with her historical werewolf tale 'Mark of the Beast'. Her Indian milieu is skilfully rendered, with a convincing evocation of the sights, sounds and – most impressively – smells of the harbour in which the protagonist's ship is docked, and of the marketplace through which he stalks the beast of the title. Less convincing is the realisation of character, in particular Luis Da Silva, whose USP is his ability to see ghosts. He's an odd, quirky, creation but he remains underdeveloped as Kidd shifts the narrative focus onto other, less engaging characters, thus dissipating interest in the outcome. A Kiplingesque take on werewolves might have seemed a good idea in theory, but in practice Kidd takes us to a place we already know too well.

Da Silva appears again in Kidd's second story in the anthology, this time in an analectic interlude in the otherwise contemporary 'Cats and Architecture'. If Kipling echoed too strongly in her first tale, here the voices of Daphne Du Maurier, Nicholas Roeg, Mervyn Peake, Visconti and even Robert E. Howard seem to be battling it out to the extent that the author's own voice is all but drowned out. A pity, because Venice as a setting, as well as the mystery around which the narrative is spun, might have been proved more enthralling had it not been embellished with so many allusions. In 'City in Aspic', Conrad Williams makes far better use of Venice as a setting. He weaves the city into the fabric of his narrative, lending texture to his text when he describes streets that 'whispered with uncollected litter and nervous pigeons', or the 'bleach of winter that pocketed the city's colour for months on end'. He understands too the weight of history that threatens to swamp Venice and that imbues it with an air of timelessness that allows it to serve as a backdrop to the performance of any life of the last fifteen hundred years. And most of all, he recognises the city's elegiac quality, especially the brooding sadness of its winter abandonment by tourists and visitors. Within this haunted cityscape, Williams's protagonist, Massimo, manager of a hotel once owned by his father, becomes

embroiled in a murder mystery and discovers unexpected echoes of a much earlier crime, the memory of which he has suppressed. It is a crime for which Massimo was not responsible but for which, inevitably, he is forced to pay the consequences. Williams acknowledges the explicit influence of Roeg's *Don't Look Now* on his story, but where Kidd's tale seems content to pay homage, 'City in Aspic' uses it as a touchstone against which to measure itself. From its drowned ruins he builds something equally chilling, magical and beautiful.

Christopher Fowler's 'Crocodile Lady' is as much a temporal journey through London's lost history as it is a journey across – or rather under – the city. As with Williams's depiction of Venice, Fowler's London seems to exert a conscious psychic influence on the story's protagonist – in this case an elderly teacher shepherding a group of kids on a school outing. The narrative foregrounds her quest to rescue an abducted child, but embedded in the text is another kind of quest – to retrieve those values which 'progress' has eroded, but which once made the city's populace a community. Ramsey Campbell's unfortunate tourist, Barry, also quests after the unattainable in the truly merciless Greek holiday hell of 'All For Sale'. It's difficult to feel much empathy for the self-doubting protagonist – his attempt to get laid are thwarted by his inability to take the initiative, while his fear of confrontation leads, perversely, to a greater threat than that which he tries to avoid. Sex is only tangentially Barry's holy grail: what he most desires is security from all of life's potential threats. One hopes the story might sound a cautionary note to those who take pride in revealing their stupidity to the seemingly dozens of camera crews clogging up holiday resorts like Ibiza and Kos to make docu-crap shows with which to insult our intelligence back home. But then, Campbell probably doesn't feature on their holiday reading list. Shame.

It's back to London for Elizabeth Hand's marvellous 'Cleopatra Brimstone', in which the heroine, an American lepidopterist, thrives on the city's undercurrents of sexuality and power. Janie has come to London after being raped, and uses her sexuality as a means to reassert identity and her own sense of control. This makes for some dangerous games which casts her in an ambiguous light and thus forces us to question our instinctive empathetic alignment with her. The style here is deceptively simple, the clarity of Hand's prose seducing the reader into making assumptions about Janie that are brutally undermined at the story's close. The ending shocks not simply because it is unexpected – it is – but because it presents us with a final usurpation of control.

Muriel Gray's 'Shite-Hawks' and Douglas Smith's 'By Her Hand, She Draws You Down' are fine examples of contemporary horror, both culled from the pages of TTA. The former roots around in the stinking detritus of urban society and uncovers new demons to haunt our dreams, while the latter explores the all consuming nature of creative art, suggesting a vampiric relationship between artist and subject. Joel Lane's 'The Lost District' is even better, an intensely sad tale which forces us to confront the true nature of loss. In this quietly devastating dissection of Thatcherism, Lane, like Fowler, takes it as read that the people who inhabit a city are as much a part of its material existence as the bricks and mortar that comprise its buildings and structures. In its subtle, understated manner, the story suggests that in denying the concept of society, we lose touch with the past, with each other, and ultimately with ourselves. The main character's attempt to rediscover the lost district proves futile, and the story concludes on a bitter, angry note as he recognises the 'eighteen years of selfishness and waste' on which his material success has been founded.

'Outfangthief' and 'Struwwelpeter' make both this collection and YBF&H, and it's not difficult to see why. The former, by Gala Blau, is a hard-edged, fast moving tale in which Sarah, the protagonist, is pursued across Britain by a man – Manser, a real nasty piece of work – to whose boss she owes seventeen grand. Her husband has burned himself to death and to further complicate matters, her troubled daughter has become the target of Manser's interest. The girl, Laura, seems to exist at one remove from what is going on around her, unaware of the danger of their predicament. Instead she appears to bond with a ragged group of shapeshifting women, who sense a kinship with her. The basis of this relationship is never made clear, other than a vague implication that these are the outcasts of modern British society, but ultimately that doesn't matter. Blau manages to render a convincing portrait of Sarah's fearful but defiant state of mind, in particular of the manner in which she refuses to give up hope of escape, even when her situation seems most desperate. And in Manser, Blau has created a villain cut from a similar cloth to one of Poppy Brite's embodiments of savag-

ery and depravation. 'Struwwelpeter', by Glen Hirshberg, reads like Ray Bradbury without the sentiment and with a little bit of the Brothers Grimm filtered into the mix. The story is narrated by Andrew, a kid somewhat in awe of his buddy Peter, a fearless, stroppy wise-ass with a fondness for putting the wind up his pals. The main narrative is set one Halloween night, when Peter bullies Andrew and some other kids into breaking into a reputedly haunted house. He intends to give them the fright of their lives but things don't quite go as planned. There are elements of the boy who cried wolf and other nasty fairy tales here, and on the surface we go along with what seems a traditional haunted house story. But Hirshberg has a knack for wrongfooting the reader; we think we know where we're headed, but the place we end up is not at all where we expected. Peter's prank is turned back on himself, but also on us, though we don't recognise that until the narrative returns to Andrew's present. Even then, when we learn 'what Peter did next', we're never quite sure of the originator of his terrible actions.

Donald Burleson's 'Pumpjack' is an hallucinatory tale in which the protagonist imagines oil derricks, dotted across the desert landscape, taking on an eerie, insectoid life of their own. 'First, Catch Your Demon', by Graham Joyce, is a playful tale in which scorpions and sex combine to break down the narrator's self-imposed isolation; Lynda Rucker's atmospheric 'No More A-Roving' concerns a young American backpacker reaching the edge of the world on the Dingle Peninsula in the West of Ireland. The tone is fatalistic, almost doom-laden, and the traveller's listless weariness is skilfully portrayed as is his quiet acceptance of his final journey; Philip K. Dick features as the protagonist of Paul McAuley's 'The Two Dicks', a poignant, bittersweet story in which the amphetamine-fueled SF writer's attempts to expose the massive fraud perpetrated on America – that the second Dick of the title, Richard Nixon, is about to serve his third term as president – is thwarted by his own agent, working alongside Haldeman, Nixon's Chief of Staff.

In a more traditional horror mode are the stories by Tanith Lee and Michael Chislett and were this not a 'Best of' anthology, both would seem oddly out of place alongside the more brutal, urban and detached sensibilities of the bulk of the other tales. Richard Lupoff's 'Simeon Dimsby's Workshop' exists on a plane somewhere between the two, initially coming across as a conventional, rather cozy story of a struggling horror writer, but metamorphosing into the kind of grisly satire that Kim Newman does so well. Dennis Etchison's 'Got to Kill Them All' satirise TV reality gameshows very effectively, while Charles L. Grant gives us a retired beat cop whose inability to escape his past leads to him treading the sidewalks from the other side of righteousness in 'Whose Ghosts These Are'. Poppy Brit's protagonist resurrects her murdered lover in order that she might continue to feast on his culinary delights in 'O Death, Where Is They Spatula'; and in 'Most of My Friends Are Two-Thirds Water', Kelly Link's narrator seems to be conflicted about her identity and place in the world. She connects only intermittently with those around her and we're never quite sure whether this is due to a slippage in her consciousness or if it stems from some external crisis we've failed to identify. Link's liminal prose serves as a metaphor for the reader's increasing sense of disorientation.

Thomas Ligotti's 'Our Temporary Supervisor' is a disturbing, creepy story reminiscent of Kafka and Orwell, with a nod in the direction of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. It takes the form of a manuscript written by an employee of the omniscient Quine Organisation, detailing their increasingly regimented and hellish work practices, which he has sent to a publication 'across the border'. In it he relates the changes initiated in the workplace – a factory whose employees assemble bits of metal sent there from another factory – by the temporary supervisor. These changes mean they work longer hours, have shorter and fewer breaks, complaints are not tolerated and resignations not accepted. To exist as a citizen in this State is impossible unless one is an employee of the Quine Organisation, a Q.Org national, as the protagonist calls himself. In the end, the boundaries between the workplace and home, between work and life, are blurred, and the meaning of life is reduced to production. One suspects that Ligotti's targets are the soulless corporations which dominate, not just American but global industry. The story takes issue with the platitudes spouted by the shared interests of government and business about how they are working for the good of citizens and employees, suggesting that the only interests being furthered are their own. Like the best horror stories, it raises awkward questions, provokes thought, and, most importantly, it chills.

That Jones has included Ligotti's story alongside tales by Lane, Williams, Fowler and Hand, as well as those by Lee, Kidd and Chislett,

illustrates my point about the difficulty in trying to discern the criteria which governs the editor's interrogation of the genre. Perhaps what it really indicates is the fluidity, the adaptability and the vigour of Horror. That it can embrace this range of material should, once and for all, silence those who keep bleating on about how Horror is dead.

TALES FROM EARTHSEA

Ursula Le Guin

Orion hb, 296pp, £10.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Before Harry Potter and Hogwarts there was Earthsea and the school for magicians on the island of Roke, whose most celebrated pupil went on to become the Archmage Ged. Published in the early 1970s with a young adult audience in mind, the original trilogy of Earthsea books received much critical acclaim and has remained popular with both children and adults ever since. Le Guin has returned to her fictional creation several times and this latest excursion contains five stories, two of novella length, and ranges far and wide across Earthsea's history, filling in some of the gaps past adventures may have left in readers' minds. In addition Le Guin gives us an essay that shades in much of the background to her fiction, and which fans of this creation should find of much interest.

The longest story, 'The Finder', details how the boy Otter escaped from an insane wizard and went on to help lay the foundations for Roke's later success. 'Darkrose and Diamond' is a story in which love conquers all, even the obstacles put in the way of a witch's daughter and the gifted son of a merchant, who wants to make music but is forced to choose between magic and commerce. In 'The Bones of the Earth' a magician gives his life to save a city from an earthquake, while 'On the High Marsh' has a mage who was broken by a failed power struggle finding peace as a healer of animals in an isolated rural community. 'Dragonfly' brings us to the present day, with a young girl seeking admittance to the men only school for wizards, and thus setting in motion a train of events that will change Earthsea forever.

These stories are beautifully written, with compelling characterization and convincing use of magic. What makes them so special though, as ever with Le Guin's work, is the political dimension she brings to the text. In her introduction to this volume Le Guin talks about how commodified fantasy tends towards the trivial, dispensing with ethical and intellectual complexity. She refuses to give room to such ultimate concepts as good and evil. Instead the people in her stories often act badly but with the best of intentions, or their actions can be attributed to madness, as with the chillingly psychotic wizard in 'The Finder' or the broken man who takes centre stage for 'On the High Marsh'. She deplores the things that these people do, but her judgements are always tempered with compassion and understanding. Le Guin doesn't have much time for heroes in the traditional sense; she is on the side of the ordinary people of the world, and courage consists of a willingness to trust others, to allow one's self to be vulnerable. Central to her work is the idea that man has fallen out of empathy with the rest of nature, and symptomatic of this is his insistence on division of the sexes. In Earthsea, as in our own world, women are all too often made the scapegoats for everything that goes wrong. One can already see in the anti-women stance and insistence on wizards being celibate of 'The Finder' all the troubles that are stored up for dramatic resolution in the later 'Dragonfly' and, ironically perhaps, while this subtext gives the book much of its moral authority and interest it is also the only serious flaw. Le Guin rejects the facile value judgements attendant on good and evil, but then replaces this dichotomy with an equally simplistic division along gender lines. Women in *Tales from Earthsea* are loving and caring, generous of spirit and wise. The best of the men are allowed to share these virtues, but we look in vain for some corresponding recognition that, when afforded opportunity, women can act just as badly as the worst of the men.

Tales from Earthsea is a book that will appeal to the seasoned reader of fantasy and convert many of those who previously dismissed the whole genre as sword and sorcery shenanigans, and for that reason should be welcomed, but the attempt at positive discrimination somewhat undercuts the credibility of the whole.

THE DARK FANTASTIC

Douglas Winter

HarperCollins pb, 671pp, £8.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Biographies are always problematic for a reviewer, in that almost invariably he or she will lack any knowledge of the subject's life other than what is already in the public domain, and so cannot judge the accuracy of much that is presented as factual. The problem is compounded when, as with this Authorized Biography of Clive Barker, the biographer is a friend of his subject. On the one hand there is the hope that what we are given is the inside story, the real McCoy as it were, and on the other the sneaking suspicion that objectivity may be compromised by the understandable desire to present a friend in a favourable light, the dread that one day he may have to sit down to dinner with the subject and give an account of himself, or indeed the possibility that he may never be invited to dinner again.

Douglas Winter's book is different from most literary biographies I've read. The early sections dealing with childhood are typical of such volumes, but as soon as Barker's career as a playwright begins the life gets shunted into a siding. Thereafter each chapter comes with a work from Barker's *oeuvre* as its subtitle, and the bulk of the text is taken up with exposition and discussion, any personal details fitted in almost as an afterthought. Without this material barely a quarter of the book would remain, and you could make a case for *The Dark Fantastic* more accurately being categorized as a critical study of Barker set within a biographical framework.

I'm not convinced of the wisdom of this approach. Firstly, the odds are good that anyone investing time and money in such a book will already be familiar with Barker's creative output, and certainly we don't need the sheer volume of plot synopsis that Winter provides. As an example, he includes a detailed account of Barker's first story, 'The Wood On The Hill', a largely pointless exercise as the story itself is printed in its entirety in an appendix. As for Winter's critical acumen, certainly he's an astute and insightful commentator, but Barker's work has already been widely discussed (in an exhaustive bibliography Winter himself lists over five hundred interviews, articles and studies of relevance). Should the opportunity to write a genuine biography have been sacrificed to add just another critique to the list, however worthy?

Of course a writer is interesting because he writes. Barker comes over as somebody who lives very much inside his own head and makes the point that his longest and most significant relationship has been with his imagination. Any biography must take this into account. Creativity however doesn't exist in a vacuum. Winter, a respected writer and editor himself, is good at placing Barker's work in a social context and assessing its standing within the world of genre publishing, but too often turns coy when relating it to details of Barker's actual life.

We're repeatedly told that Barker's work is intensely personal and throughout there are tantalizing hints of life informing art, but Winter seldom follows up on them to any satisfactory degree. As early as page eighteen we're told that Barker 'experienced a profound spiritual awakening' in his forties, but despite unprecedented access to Barker Winter chooses not to delve too deeply into what brought about this sea change. Instead, in a chapter headed 'Finding A Religion', Winter himself expounds on the nature of faith, drawing his inferences from the text of *Everville*. We learn that *Sacrament*, published in 1996, was inspired by the AIDS related death of Barker's cousin Mark and its Yorkshire setting based on the village where Mark lived and died, with which Barker was familiar, but until that moment neither Mark or Yorkshire are mentioned in the text. On page ninety we read that, 'On a whim – and a desire to see America – Clive left for Boston at the invitation of William A Henry III', and that Henry 'kept Clive for several months, which nearly ended his relationship with John Gregson', and that's all, nothing about this first trip to America, not a single detail, no discussion of where he went or what he saw, how it might have effected his development as an artist; significantly, soon after Barker started work on his breakthrough *Books of Blood*, whose opening story is set on the NY underground. One suspects that Winter is shying away from the implications for his subject of that word 'kept'.

And that leads on to the biggest problem with this book, the lack of balance. We get one remark by Dean Koontz quoted out of context, so that Koontz can have his wrist slapped for badmouthing Clive, but

by and large there are no critical voices raised. We learn that Barker didn't have a high opinion of his teachers, but the only teachers we hear from are those who recognized and nurtured his genius, not those who were surprised the podgy, silent boy in the back row made something of his life. We hear from directors who moan about money grubbing producers sabotaging their noble efforts to bring Clive's vision to the screen, but not a tinkle out of the producers themselves. Barker's friend, Pinhead actor Doug Bradley, tells us at great length how Clive's West End debut with *The Secret Life of Cartoons* was sabotaged by other hands, but then lashes out at the pettiness of critics who wouldn't concede that a horror writer could also do comedy and panned the show. Eh Doug? Didn't those nasty critics recognize all the flaws you did? And so on and so forth.

Winter tells us that Barker's actions are often dictated by romantic considerations, but the conspiracy of silence becomes a deafening roar when we touch on Barker's most intimate relationships. Of his partners, the only one allowed a voice is current lover David Armstrong, who Barker married in 1997, and naturally he doesn't have a bad word to say. Other men, most notably John Gregson, with whom Barker lived for ten years, are not heard from. Barker says the relationship with Gregson ended when he got too abusive and controlling, and there's no reason not to believe that, but it would have been nice to hear the other side of the story. Winter either doesn't tell or simply didn't ask.

Okay, I don't want a Morton kiss and tellography, but neither do I want a one sided spin biography, and that is what this is. I came away from *The Dark Fantastic* with the feeling that my understanding and appreciation of Barker's work had been enriched considerably, and if that's all you're after from a biography then I can recommend it without reservation, but with little sense that I knew Barker the man any better. When discussing his work Barker often speaks of embracing the dark side, and part of what makes it so powerful is the flawed characters he creates, but Winter seems reluctant to allow Barker any flaws, and so does both his subject and readers a disservice. Of course it may be that there is no 'side' to Barker at all, but to know for sure we'll have to wait for the unauthorized biography.

MAPPA MUNDI

Justina Robson

Pan pb, 628pp, £6.99

reviewed by Rosanne Rabinowitz

This near-future tale spins a complex plot that revolves around genetic engineering/mapping and nanotechnology, starting with a series of 'legends' offering intriguing glimpses of each character's past. In the present we find Natalie, a brilliant young scientist with her own experience of depression, working on the use of genetic mapping technology to alleviate severe mental illness. When an 'ordinary' bloke called Ian falls off a roof and comes to consciousness with damage that makes him perceive living things as terrifying mechanical objects, he finds himself at the centre of a struggle for control of this technology. White Horse, a radical Native American, is assaulted by a neighbour and narrowly escapes her burning house. Enter White Horse's half-brother, FBI agent Jude, who begins investigating a wave of violent mental illness on the reservation. The characters are soon ducking and diving and unravelling conspiracies by international agencies as well as free and not-so-free radicals.

Robson handles this very adroitly. In other hands it all could have gone very Hollywood, but she keeps it real and close to the characters' emotions. She tackles the issues and the science with clarity, merging those elements with the flow of story and feeling. Robson's first novel *Silver Screen* had been packed with ideas, but didn't always allow the space to explore them fully. The greater length of *Mappa Mundi* gives more scope for this – and for the characters to develop and do their stuff. There's no doubt that Natalie's a plucky lass, but she's no superwoman either and she comes across as believable and engaging. Meanwhile, the conflict-ridden relationship between Jude and his radical half-sister is rendered with balance and insight. I found that I did want to know more about what happened to Mary, Jude's boss at the FBI, in between her legend and the action. We first meet her as a restless, ambitious and maybe cynical young woman, but there seemed to be a narrative gap in how she turns out to play the role she does in the book. Even so, her motivation is still understandable and she is by no means a cardboard villain. Enjoyable and thought-provoking, this com-

plex, character-centred thriller should captivate even those who often find thrillers unsatisfying.

SHADOW BLACK

Tom Arden

Big Engine pb, 299pp, £8.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Arden's latest novel takes us back to England in 1955. The young and somewhat naive Harriet Locke is invited to spend the summer at Shadow Black, the seaside mansion of reclusive publishing magnate Lord Harrowblest, whose portrait is being painted by her fiancé, avant-garde artist Mark Vardell. Vardell is sleeping with His Lordship's wife, one time goddess of the silver screen Yardley Urban. Also in residence are Harrowblest's devoted manservant Collidge, the drunken songwriter Jellicoe Travers, the forthright and much married Cora Van Voyd and her fifteen year old nephew Toby Chance, who is fascinated by science fiction, among other things. This potentially volatile mix of personalities is made even more so by the arrival of the mysterious Mr Vox, ostensibly tutor to the young Chance, but in reality much more than he at first seems, a man with an agenda that ultimately will involve the exposure of all their dark secrets.

I'm not familiar with the work of Tom Arden, so this stand alone novel came as a very pleasant surprise. It contains nothing earth shattering, but it is pulled off with panache and style, and infused with a delightful sense of play. The effect is as if P.G. Wodehouse had collaborated with Charles Addams on the ultimate English country house mystery, throwing equal measures of science fiction and understated eroticism into the mix. There's a cast of engaging and larger than life characters, with some rich black humour arising out of their interaction and the hint of powerful emotional undercurrents. There are innovative leaps in the storytelling, with different narrative techniques being used to enrich the reading experience, as for instance when the author switches to play writing mode for one pivotal sequence, and other texts seamlessly woven into the body of the work. The plot has more ups and downs than a snakes and ladders board, with a show stopping grand finale that sees Arden deftly producing a whole series of rabbits from his top hat to constantly wrong foot the reader. Some of the bits perhaps don't fit too well into the overall structure, but this is a minor quibble and should not be allowed to detract from what is a delightful and entertaining read, a quality act that for most should slip down a treat.

QUIN'S SHANGHAI CIRCUS

Edward Whittemore

Old Earth Books pb, 272 pp, \$17.95

reviewed by Jeff Topham

Despite having written five remarkable novels between 1974 and 1987, Edward Whittemore is now largely forgotten. All of his novels fell quickly out of print, and when Whittemore died in 1995, all had long since sunk into obscurity. Last November, however, in an effort that should be lauded as a public service, Old Earth Books reissued all five of Whittemore's novels in nicely packaged trade paperback editions, complete with new introductory material. Why should you care? Because Edward Whittemore was one of the finest writers of his generation and one of the most intriguing American novelists of the last quarter-century. His novels are intricate, sprawling, and eccentric, elaborately imagined and finely crafted. They are funny, moving, and profound. They are prolonged meditations on history and the demands the past makes upon the present, but they are also marvelous entertainments sprung from a generous and singular imagination.

Whittemore is best known for the four wonderful novels that comprise the *Jerusalem Quartet* – *Sinai Tapestry* (1977), *Jerusalem Poker* (1978), *Nile Shadows* (1983), and *Jericho Mosaic* (1987) – but it is his stunning first novel, *Quin's Shanghai Circus* (1974), that in my opinion is his most complex and powerful work. The novel opens in the Bronx in 1965 with the arrival from Japan of huge man named Geraty, who brings with him an addiction to Japanese horseradish, a Nestorian cross of inestimable value, and the largest collection of Japanese pornography ever seen in the West. Geraty, we learn, has traveled to New

York to find a young man named Quin, whose parents vanished in Shanghai in the aftermath of World War II, and to convince him to travel to Japan to learn their fate. So begins Quin's investigation into the secrets of his past, a search that provides the framework on which Whittemore hangs his dense and intricate tale. As Quin begins to question his father's former associates, Whittemore unfolds the complex story of an odd group of conspirators – Quin's parents, a one-eyed general of the Japanese secret police, a Catholic priest accused of pederasty, a Russian linguist and anarchist – who formed a clandestine spy ring in the 1930s and subsequently changed the course of World War II.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about *Quin's Shanghai Circus* is that it's a historical novel that reads like a fantasy. Whittemore pushes the boundaries of realism toward (and occasionally into) the surreal and the absurd, but even the novel's strangest scenes are utterly convincing. Many will imprint themselves indelibly upon the reader's imagination: the meeting of four conspirators (all wearing gas masks) on the beach at Kamakura, Geraty's midnight showings of animal husbandry films that are received by his debauched audience as pornography, Mama's comically elaborate scheme to use strangulation and a chronic masturbator to conceive a child for her aging lover. Other scenes are more like vivid nightmares of depravity and cruelty. Whittemore's terse description of the atrocities attending the sack of Nanking is one of the most profoundly painful passages I can ever recall reading, but these dark scenes are ultimately balanced by quietly moving moments of tenderness and grace. History, Whittemore shows us, encompasses both tragedy and farce, and his particular strength is showing how the sweep of history plays out in the lives of individual men and women. At the center of this sprawling story of espionage and war stands the flawed but very human figure of the impostor and clown Geraty, whose anguished penance and awkward stumbling toward redemption constitute one of the major movements of the plot.

The story plays out through a carefully orchestrated narrative that weaves several different strands together, shifting continually between past and present. It's a technically dazzling performance, but it's also central to Whittemore's conviction that memory can be as potent a force as lived experience. The past, in this novel, is never really lost, and for these characters that fact is both a blessing and a curse.

Quin's Shanghai Circus is a work of considerable grace and power, and it's one of life's bitter ironies that it was largely unrecognized as such while Whittemore was still alive. Old Earth Books is to be commended for rescuing this and Whittemore's other novels from an undeserved obscurity, and these new editions of his work will hopefully breathe new life into his reputation and introduce a new generation of readers to his remarkable and restless talent.

BIRMINGHAM NOIR

Edited by Joel Lane & Steve Bishop

Tindal Street Press pb, 320pp, £7.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



This collection of twenty three stories, all of them set in England's second city, aims to make Birmingham as cool to the crime aficionado as the mean streets of LA, New York and London. On that score I'm not sure they succeed as, while I came away with a few more place names to drop, I didn't get any feel for the city itself, no real sense of what made it different from any other big but nondescript burg. It would be a shame though if such considerations were allowed to detract from this book's very real achievement, because *Birmingham Noir* is one of the strongest collections of short stories that I've read in some time, with only a few pieces that do not hit the spot and a couple that must surely rate among the year's best. The presiding mood is downbeat and, with a couple of exceptions, such crime genre old reliables as the harassed policeman and the soiled but honest PI are left standing by the roadside. Instead we have ordinary people, some of them bad and others not so, trapped in extraordinary situations and doing the best that they can to get out from under.

The Kiss' by Rob Smith is a story of murder, but by incorporating themes of misogyny and race hatred becomes a painful snapshot of front line Britain. Zulfiqar Ali's 'Vendetta' is another compelling study of how violence can spiral out of control, as a man attempts to defend his own space against the inroads of drug dealers. 'Cassiopeia's Nipple'

by John Mulcreavy takes a page out of tomorrow's headlines, with themes of child murder and vigilantism, and is an alarming account of the dangers of being perceived as different. 'Games Without Rules' by Rubina Din has childhood patterns of bullying and abuse carried over into adulthood with tragic consequences, while in 'The Mentality' by John Dalton a less than scrupulous private eye stumbles into a murder investigation and sees the chance to turn a quick profit.

The sex industry features in several of the stories. John Harvey's 'Smile' is a powerful and moving story of an East European girl coming to the UK in search of a new life and then forced into prostitution, portraying such immigrants in sympathetic and humane terms. Mike Chinn's 'Brindley's Place' covers similar territory, with its world weary anti-hero trying to find redemption through saving another lost soul from the porn industry. 'Means to an End' by Claire Thomas has a young runaway deciding to return home after confronting the death of a prostitute, but is more in the nature of snapshot of misery than story, and suffers slightly from its rather obvious moral slant.

Serial killers of one stripe or another are a recurring theme, as for instance in Lane's own 'This Night Last Woman', an outstanding story in an above average collection, a bittersweet tale of murder and lonely people searching the night for some comfort, beautifully written and characterized. Clever plotting and a convincing narrative voice typify fellow editor Bishop's 'Safe as Milk', with a man lured into the web of a woman with a grudge against all men. The Inland Waterways Association' by Nicholas Royle is another exercise in deft construction, all the pieces falling neatly into place as the story's protagonist becomes part of a deadly game being played by a killer with pretensions to art. Not so successful is Paul Finch's 'Trashman', one of the book's few weak offerings, with a policeman discovering a clandestine organization of serial killer groupies, a story that suffers from too obvious a plot and lack of credibility, at times veering uncomfortably close to parody.

As ever, the family is a hotbed of violence. In 'Doctor's Orders' by Judith Cutler the abused bride of an arranged marriage engineers a satisfying revenge on her husband. Kay Fletcher's blackly comedic 'Pest Control' is a little too obvious and plot reliant, rather like Roald Dahl in *Unexpected* mode, but in the end everything comes together so well you can't help applauding as a man who has disposed of his annoying family gets a much deserved comeuppance. 'Passing Over' by Elizabeth Mulrey puts a chilling spin on a death in the family, with the suggestion of much more than meets the eye, while in 'The End of Something' by Wayne Dean-Richards a young boy's protectiveness towards his sister ends in violence and loss of innocence.

Obsession and madness feature in several of the stories. The protagonist of Andrew Newsham's 'His Own Skeleton' has an *idée fixe* worthy of Poe, the matter of fact narration heightening the drama, while 'The Way She Looks at Me' by Pauline Gould focuses on a security guard whose grip on sanity is slowly unraveling. Pauline E. Dungate's 'Lucy', one of the most distressing stories here, is the painfully detailed account of a street person losing her mind as the strain of looking after a child becomes too much for her, a strand of compassion redeeming the story's bleak horror, and hints in the background of something far more sinister.

Career criminals are another recurring theme, though here more than elsewhere the collection suffers from a familiarity of material, the kind of thing we've all seen done plenty of times before and have come to expect from the crime genre. In the going through the motions 'Dyed Blonde' by Rachel Taylor a woman tries to escape her criminal past and, needless to say, fails. Similarly in Mike Scully's 'Little Moscow' a man gets out of gaol and comes looking for the people he holds responsible, only to do no better second time around than he did the first. There's not much you can say about these. They're readable, but have nothing new to add and don't sit well with the originality of the remainder. Don Nixon's 'Santa's Grotto' is in a similar vein as regards plot, but saves itself from the clutches of the mundane with some nice touches of characterization and humour as the protagonist dons red hood and white beard to get back at the partner who betrayed him all those years ago.

The book ends on a high note, with the brutal and emotive 'The Art of Leaving Completely' by Simon Avery, a writer whose work I usually don't enjoy, but here outstanding with the picture of a marriage on the way out and a man who tries to save somebody else even though he can't save himself. Blurb: Carol Anne Davis reckons this story alone is worth the cover price, and she's not wrong, though it's far from being the only reason to seek out these second city sinners.

PHANTOMS OF VENICE

Edited by David Sutton

Shadow Publishing hb, 223pp, £25

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Lavishly produced in a limited edition of 200 copies and with an evocative cover by Harry O. Morris, this collection contains ten stories of the supernatural and horror set in the city of Venice, a venue that, with its paradoxical atmosphere combining romance and decay, has always appealed to writers of such work, as adequately demonstrated by Joel Lane in his comprehensive but by no means exhaustive foreword.

'The Bridge of Sighs' by Peter Tremayne has a visitor to Venice ensnared by a spirit from the past, a ghost seeking new flesh to claim as its own, the story presented in the form of a statement to the police and deftly capturing the dreamlike quality of the city, a place where past and present commingle in ways that are not always advantageous to the tourist. The same atmosphere pervades Cherry Wilder's 'Alive in Venice', with a young girl fleeing some family scandal, the details of which are never pinned down, and finding escape of a kind in the city's less explored byways. In 'Rose Nere' by Eddy C. Bertin a gangster returns to avenge the murder of his family, only himself to fall victim to one of the city's ruling deities. 'City in Aspic' by Conrad Williams is the story of Massimo, who is terrorized by a menace from his past, a tale that powerfully and ingeniously captures the feelings of guilt engendered by a crime ignored. Mike Chinn's 'Facades' effectively demonstrates that very often love cannot endure, even in the most romantic of cities, while in 'Last Exit for the Lost' by Tim Lebbon a man's past shortcomings are forcefully brought home to him by the parcels he receives from a daughter exiled to Venice as a result of his behaviour. Sutton's entertaining 'La Serinissima' is more in the line of traditional horror, with two young women falling victim to some of the city's older inhabitants, grim subterraneans with a lust for warm flesh. 'Bride of the Sea' by Anne Gay is one of the best stories in the collection, as a sculptor is afforded revenge on the man who stole her work, an oblique and moody piece with larger than life characters and an understanding of the nature of the artistic experience. Past and present merge once more in 'Angelo's Bar' by Pauline E. Dungate, with two narrative threads that ingeniously overlap as a widow returns to the scene of her past happiness and an archaeologist unearths a lost and cursed tomb. Finally there's 'The Devil's Comedy', a historical piece by Brian Stableford and perhaps the most accomplished story here. A young Englishman on the Grand Tour and with an interest in theatre attends Venice's Carnival, where he is unwittingly drawn into a drama with an alarming supernatural subtext. Stableford's evocation of an age now lost is never less than convincing and his masterful direction of the plot's diverse elements is sheer joy. It's a fitting note on which to bring down the curtain on a collection that's sure to be loudly applauded by those who appreciate dark fantasy and solid storytelling, though what the Venice Tourist Board may have to say about this offbeat take on their city is another matter entirely.

GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

Gilad Atzmon

Serpents Tail pb, 148pp, £7.99

reviewed by Rosanne Rabinowitz

Gilad Atzmon is a noted jazz saxophonist who was born in Israel but lives in voluntary exile in London. He is a passionate anti-Zionist and internationalist. He sets out to explore these concerns with a novel set in 2052, when the state of Israel has been defunct for forty years. Citizens of the former Israel live scattered around the world: the first wave of refugees came fleeing Jewish fundamentalism, the second wave came fleeing cataclysmic war.

Atzmon's story touches on many issues, including exile, ethnic cleansing, nationalism, anti-Semitism and Jewish identity. The fact he uses humour is admirable. But he chooses the wrong protagonist, a certain Gunther Wanker. Gunther serves in the Israeli Army in the 1960s, enters another kind of service in the peace movement and finally moves to Germany when he has had enough of his native land. Reveling in the delights of guilt-ridden German womanhood, he becomes

a professor of philosophy and founds his own branch, 'Peepology' – the study of voyeurism. Gunther is a total schmuck and literally a tosser, hence the name Wanker. In fact, Gunther's masturbatory activities have earned him comparisons with Philip Roth's Portnoy.

The novel is really a 150-page monologue by Gunther, with an appendix by the fictitious German Institute for the Documentation of Zion. Gunther is grubby, pompous and boring. Characters don't have to be sympathetic to engage the reader, but they need some complexity, wit or emotion. Gunther, however, sounds a single and very monotonous note as he relates his sexual obsessions and misadventures. There is a dated whiff of the 60s to all this, when some guys in the countercultural ranks seriously believed that jokes about wanking and tits 'n' bums were not only hilarious, but bound to bring the current social order crashing to its knees. So, will Gunther's musings on female ejaculation get Prime Minister Sharon and co quacking in their boots? I don't think so. While reading this book, my Inner Social Realist was yammering: 'I'm interested in what the author is trying to do, but couldn't these issues be explored better with a character who isn't such a tospot misogynist? And why are all the other characters so lacking in presence? Why are all the women characters so wimpy?' 'Shut up!' I shouted back. 'This is a satire, dammit! This is ironic! This is how he's making a critique!' So I sent the old Inner Social Realist packing. And yes, there are some funny and effective moments in the book. Gunther shoots himself in the foot and becomes a 'hero' accidentally; he joins the peace movement in order to get laid. There are amusing speculations on the extraterrestrial origins of pitta bread and other culinary specialties of his homeland. There are terse passages relating Gunther's war experiences.

But that still left open the question of whether this book succeeds as a work of fiction. So this is satire. But what of the speculative satirists – Kurt Vonnegut springs to mind – who still create fully-realised characters, stories and settings? So much of that is missing here. I found, for example, that there is surprising little sense of place in most of the novel. Though I was kept up to date on who or what Gunther was shagging, I often lost track of whether he was in Israel or in Germany.

When Gunther is invited back home for a conference of Palestinian colleagues in Peepology, it looked like the book would pick up. So what is life like in the mid-21st century Middle East without Israel? Are people in Palestine really free? Well, there are more jokes about pitta and hummus, an observation that the Jewish settlements on the West Bank are the now the dodgiest slum areas, a suggestion from the assembled Peepologists that mutually arranged rape-days will heal the breach between the two communities in a situation where sexual restraint is a symptom of lack of mutual respect. Er, perhaps this was meant to attack misogyny in both Israeli and Palestinian society, but it didn't quite hit the mark. When Gunther is back in his hotel room, he falls asleep while he's meditating on the mountains and desert of his childhood. Then it's back to business as usual! Our man Wanker dreams he's in the desert with his favourite (plastic) girlfriend: 'I go on fucking like a real macho man and she squeals'. Ho-hum . . .

THE VIRTUAL MENAGERIE & OTHER STORIES

Andrew Hook

Elastic Press pb, 161pp, £5

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Andrew Hook is a writer whose work should be familiar to readers of TTA and this volume, the first from a new publisher established by Hook to produce collections from writers who have made a name for themselves in the independent press, contains nineteen of his stories, demonstrating the whole range of Hook's talents. The book is competently produced and attractively packaged, but I could have done with slightly clearer print, though against that has to be set the low cost.

The author's prose doesn't always hit the spot, occasionally seeming inelegant or awkward, but he has a nice line in invention and a gift for the telling descriptive phrase, combined with a talent for memorable titles and final twists that pull the rug out from under the reader's feet without destroying credibility. In the atmospheric title story a scientist tries to save endangered species against a backdrop of the new Ice Age, playing at Noah with his cyberspace ark and never

realizing how he is sacrificing his own most precious relationship through pursuit of a chimera. 'Slender Lois, Slow Doris' has another, arboreal race co-existing with mankind, reminiscent of *The X-Files* in its overtly sinister handling of the idea, and expertly posing the question of who the real menace is. 'The Illusion of Life', my personal favourite, has a man who believes that the secret of existence is revealed by cartoons and sets to work to build a zoetrope to demonstrate the true nature of reality, but loses faith when the woman he loves falls victim to his paranoia, a zestful story that effectively combines a convincing and original portrait of obsession with the vibrancy of cartoons. In the bizarre and perhaps unfortunately titled 'Spilt Beaver' the skeleton of a giant rodent is used as a church by the people of a small town, while in 'Monochrome Tiger' a renegade artist pursues his own unique career path, two stories that play games with the reader's mind by shifting perspective. In 'Awkward Scenes With Girls' Hook takes the old horror trope of the casual pick-up with minatory undertones and breathes new life into the cliché, while 'The Release' offers an almost surreal and disturbing take on child abuse, the dream-like quality of the imagery at pleasing odds with the matter of fact narration, culminating in the most chilling last line in the whole book.

'The In-Between Days', at first irritating by the way it piles up seemingly random events in a man's life, redeems itself with an ending that revises reality to accommodate the narrator's new status. Dystopian snapshot 'One Day, All This Will Be Fields' convincingly depicts a savage, racist future, but ultimately holds out a message of hope, as suggested by the title. 'The Wreckage' offers an unusual slant on vampirism, with teens licking their lips at the scene of a car accident, though as a story it seems somewhat insubstantial. Also on the downside 'The Honey Badger's Child', about an African were-creature's encounter with a young American, has a strong sense of place and some evocative language, but doesn't really seem to go anywhere. 'Baby' is the most technically ambitious of these stories, juxtaposing images of eroticism and an automobile accident in a manner reminiscent of *Crash*, but the attempt at a dual stream of consciousness doesn't entirely come off, is a little too raw, almost as if a first draft. The strangely titled 'The Girl Who Ran and Ran and Ended Up in Bed in a Strange Inn' is a curiously effective piece of surrealism, with the girl's pursuer never named and no explanation given for the odd behaviour of the people she meets. 'Cats Teeth' looks at an unusual relationship, the old boy meets girl shtick given a new twist, while 'The Chair', in memory of Ionescan absurdity, has a man turned into an article of furniture and given a whole new slant on life. 'Delight in Living Things' sees a man return from the dead, while 'Man Was in the Forest' offers a meticulously detailed and ultimately moving examination of grief. Grief, guilt and the need for forgiveness are also central to the effective 'April Syrup', with a man taking on responsibility for the death of a loved one. The last story in the book is also the worst, 'Pussycat', the tale of a woman called Christine who is variously a prostitute with blood in the bath water, a young woman out on a blind date and a feral creature in the forest feeding on dead birds, with little demarcation between the various phases. I read it twice and still have no idea what it was all about.

It's sad that the collection had to end on such a low point, but with nineteen stories there are almost certainly going to be some that don't agree with every reader. The general quality is what counts, and on that score the best stories here are among the finest that the independent press has to offer, while overall there's more than enough to reward careful reading and hopefully ensure that this project gets the support it richly deserves.

NOT THE END OF THE WORLD

Kate Atkinson

Doubleday hb, 278pp, £12

reviewed by Rosanne Rabinowitz

Kate Atkinson is known for her novels – *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Human Croquet* and *Emotionally Weird*. However, she first distinguished herself as a writer of short fiction, and this collection of twelve stories is a return to her original craft. Though each story can stand alone, they are loosely linked together by common characters – and by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Just about every story has a reference to *Buffy* or a character who watches *Buffy*. In 'Evil Doppelgangers' the main character is a trendy TV critic and resident *Buffy* expert who regu-

larly rolls out learned philosophical discourses on the Slayer. Beginning with the understated but post-apocalyptic 'Charlene and Trudi Go Shopping' – where two women concentrate on a shopping spree as bombs explode and civil war breaks out – the stories mingle the mundane with the extraordinary. In 'Temporal Anomaly' Marianne rings her mum up for a recipe for lemon meringue pie when she's driving on the M9, and her car is overtaken by Hades's chariot. As a ghost she is housebound. As she watches her husband and son cope with their grief, she is forced to rely on old episodes of *Star Trek* and *Buffy* to gain an understanding of her undead state. In 'Unseen Translation' a nanny turns into Artemis. Throughout the book Atkinson shows her flare for the sharp one-liner and spot-on thumbnail characterisation.

Since *Human Croquet* Atkinson has been striking out in increasingly fantastic and surreal territory, but these elements took a very self-consciously quirky and farcical turn in her third novel, *Emotionally Weird*. *Not the End of the World* however shows a consolidation and growth that transforms what didn't quite work in *Weird*; the playfulness that once veered into whimsy has real substance and wit here, and the irony actually made me laugh. I've always enjoyed the process of discovery that takes place when you learn that a character in one story knows someone in the other – and when you find out that several protagonists went out with the same guy! Linked stories are effective in communicating both connectiveness and chaos, as David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* showed a few years ago. After reading *Not the End of the World*, I'm wondering why the possibilities of this format aren't tried more often. Though the understatement of the writing is one of the book's strengths, at times it leans itself to a certain distance and cleverness. For this reason, this collection didn't wield the emotional impact of the rich and magnificent *Human Croquet*. But the poignancy of 'Temporal Anomaly' and 'Sheer Big Waste of Love' – in which the son of a dying prostitute attends the funeral of the father who rejected him – provides some balance.

The book itself is beautifully presented, each story preceded by a woodcut illustration and quotes ranging from Ovid to Emily Dickinson to . . . yes, *Buffy*. The collection is rounded off in a satisfying way when we return to the intrepid shoppers Charlene and Trudi. Now walled up by the plague police, they sensuously recall the luxuries of the past and tell each other 'it's not the end of the world'. But these stories hint at some surprises that Atkinson may have in store for the future, and a world that could just be beginning . . .

DORIAN

Will Self

Viking hb, 278pp, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

Avant-garde artist Baz Hallward falls in love with the young man Dorian Gray and creates a video installation that will capture his beauty for all time, but he makes the mistake of introducing Gray to his friend Henry Wotton, an incorrigible hedonist who begins an affair with Gray, much to Hallward's chagrin, and introduces him to all his own vices. As the 1980s continue the twin scourges of drug addiction and AIDS take their toll of Wotton's circle, but Dorian Gray remains unaffected by it all, as healthy and beautiful and charming as ever, while the man in the video installation manifests all the signs of sickness and age that pass him by. Able to indulge himself without consequence, Dorian becomes a monster, cutting a swathe through gay society until the inevitable moment of truth, at which point Self pulls a fast one, revealing the story behind the story, and in a final metafictional twist the word is made flesh.

Self has taken the familiar Oscar Wilde tale of narcissistic corruption and given it a new and socially conscious lease of life. At the start of this novel Chas marries Di, a union that in the final chapters falls apart, ending in a Parisian street; the two events seem like brackets for the book's action and embody the false optimism and hypocrisy that are its raw material. Awkward at first blush, Self's prose style soon becomes addictive, packed with scathing double entendres and epithets, memorable bon mots and witty one-liners, all of it deftly lampooning the fads and foibles of the nouveau riche and social posers as cannily as P.G. Wodehouse did the upper class twits of a previous generation. Like Plum, Self seems just that little bit in love with the people he holds up to ridicule, sympathetic of their shortcomings but not so forgiving, and his humour is far more acidic, designed not only to make

us laugh but also to despise. Hallward finds redemption through caring for fellow AIDS sufferers and Wotton's death has a certain dignity to it in that, however remiss they may be, he stays true to his principles to the end. The full weight of the author's contempt falls on the smug, self-satisfied Dorian Gray, who believes himself to be above all this, a man who embodies the young and upwardly mobile ethos, even his occasional acts of charity nothing more than cynical exercises in PR. To perhaps stretch a point, Gray can be seen as a metaphor for society itself, outwardly benign but inside uncaring, a mask that hides corruption and a criminal indifference to the suffering of others.

If I have any misgivings about the book it's to do with its depiction of the drug subculture. Wotton and his circle are simply too witty to be credible. In my, admittedly limited, experience druggies are tedious bores, focused on nothing except where their next fix is going to come from and the only ones who find their repartee in the least bit amusing are fellow addicts. Here, it's like stepping into the middle of open mic night at the Comedy Club, with every wit razor sharp and no pun that's unintended. Certainly Self stops short of making his characters glamorous, but I did find myself wishing that I was as articulate sober as they are when high, which is probably not an effect the author intended. That aside, this is a biting satire and a compelling portrait of power without responsibility. Recommended.

BLOOD AND SOULS

John Davey

Nephrite Press hb, 220pp, £20

reviewed by Peter Tennant



This debut novel is dedicated to Michael Moorcock and there are moments when it brings to mind books such as the *Von Bek* novels. *Blood and Souls* strikes a note of originality, at least in its early stages. Armageddon is to take place, but instead of the great apocalyptic battle foretold by John the Evangelist and other visionaries, the fate of creation is to be decided in a fight between two individuals, with the rest of the world kept in the dark. In the black corner is a hundred and fifty year old woman who sold her soul to the Devil in exchange for immortality, but forgot to ask for eternal youth and so now will do absolutely anything to renege on the deal. And in the white corner we have Simon, a thirtysomething tax investigator and old hippie, trapped in a marriage gone sour for no reason that he can see, but devoted to his children. The woman has demons at her beck and call. Simon gets an angel called Dylan, who is about as much hindrance as help, and in his efforts to get on his champion's wavelength indulges in some hilarious cultural faux pas.

So far, so good. Up to about the halfway point the novel is amusing, with some witty dialogue and a nice line in incidental invention, such as the depiction of Heaven as people in glass boxes all wrapped up in their own ideas of perfect bliss. The comparison that springs to mind is a low key Douglas Adams, humour with a more serious agenda at back of it all, a willingness to tackle the big questions about life, the universe and everything. Then it loses its way somewhat, the author having exercised admirable restraint so far but now deciding that something more grandiose and apocalyptic is called for, and so common or garden fantasy tropes such as Glastonbury and Stonehenge, the Holy Grail transformed into an irresistible sword, are drafted in to take up the slack. What could have been a unique and entertaining novel instead becomes a business as usual affair, with the sparkling prose gone flat, almost as if the author thinks he doesn't have to try any more now that we're standing on such familiar ground, and the reader is left feeling disappointed that a book which seemed to promise so much in the way of the extraordinary should ultimately deliver so little.

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